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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

JULY
1992

**New stories by
Molly Brown
Greg Egan
Ian Lee
Lawrence Watt-Evans
and others**



IN THE FIELD OF THE IMAGINATION,
THE ONLY LIMIT IS AUDACITY

SIMON GREEN
BLUE MOON
RISING

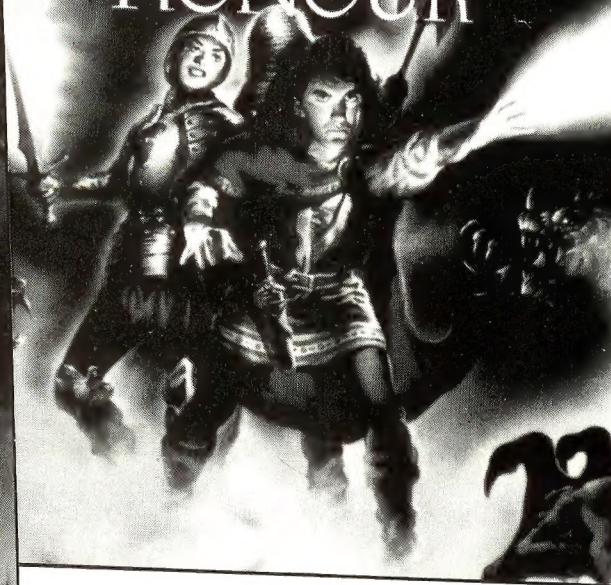
fantasy of wild magic



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author of Blue Moon Rising

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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 61**July 1992**

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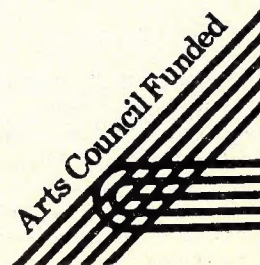
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Interface

David Pringle

The passing of **Isaac Asimov** (1920-1992) does seem to mark the end of an era in the science-fiction field. Possibly that field will go down in history as a "mid-20th-century" phenomenon, its Heroic Age precisely those decades – the 1940s and 50s – which Asimov did so much to enrich. A great proselytizer for science, a sane and liberal influence on the millions who read him, Asimov was one of sf's few household names, famed for his hundreds of non-fiction books as well as for his novels and stories. The verdict is still out on the fat bestselling novels of his "comeback" period, from *Foundation's Edge* (1982) onwards, but the early fiction, from *Pebble in the Sky* and *I, Robot* (both 1950) to *The Naked Sun* (1957) and *Nine Tomorrows* (1959), will certainly be remembered for a long time.

With the deaths of Robert Heinlein and Clifford Simak in 1988, and now Asimov, the ranks of science fiction's Heroic-Age generation are thinning. Having said that, L. Sprague de Camp (born 1907), Jack Williamson (born 1908), Fritz Leiber (born 1910), Andre Norton (born 1912), A.E. van Vogt (born 1912), Arthur C. Clarke (born 1917), Philip José Farmer (born 1918), Frederik Pohl (born 1919), Ray Bradbury (born 1920) and other veterans of the field are all still writing. Long may they thrive.

Awards Time

Congratulations to two British writers, both contributors to *Interzone*, who have recently won awards in America. **Gwyneth Jones** is the first recipient of the James Tiptree Award (given to the best sf work on a "gender" theme), for her novel *The White Queen* (Gollancz). And **Ian McDonald** has gained the Philip K. Dick Award (given to the best sf/fantasy paperback original) for his fantasy novel *King of Morning, Queen of Day* (Bantam).

Also announced recently were the winners of the British Science Fiction Association Awards:

Best novel: *The Fall of Hyperion* by **Dan Simmons**; runner up *Eternal Light* by Paul J. McAuley.

Best short fiction: "Bad Timing" by **Molly Brown**; runner up "Floating Dogs" by Ian McDonald.

Best dramatic presentation: **Terminator 2: Judgement Day**; runner up *Red Dwarf IV*.

Best artwork: **Mark Harrison**, cover for *Dreamlands* and *IZ* 48; runner up Geoff Taylor, cover for *The Bone Forest* and *IZ* 45.

Other Mags

Prospective contributors continually ask us for the addresses of other British magazines to which they can submit sf and fantasy short stories. We tell them: read *Interzone* – other magazines advertise in our pages from time to time, and you'll see some of them mentioned in our editorial and review columns. (Those who want American market information should take out a subscription to *Science-Fiction Chronicle*: see our Small Ads.)

Of course, the trouble with other folks' magazines is that some of them come and go rather rapidly. The gap left by *Fear* has tempted a few publishers into producing new horror-related titles. A recent horror-and-grue magazine which seems to have vanished in the blink of an eye was called *Terror*. Another called *Shivers* has just been announced by the publishers of the sf/media magazine *Starburst*. Meanwhile, Allan Bryce's *The Dark Side* carries on as before. But none of these horror-cum-film mags carries much fiction.

You will find fiction, and plenty of it, in the new sf magazine *Far Point* (editor Charlie Rigby, Victoria Publications, PO Box 47, Grantham, Lincs. NG31 8RJ). This glossy, 64-page magazine has impressed everybody who has seen it by actually producing four or five issues on time, as scheduled... It publishes many of the same authors as *IZ*, including some recent near-simultaneous "discoveries" such as **Julian Flood** and **Sarah Ash**; and even its artwork is improving now that **David Hardy** has consented to become its art editor. All power to *Far Point*'s elbow: it can only enliven the scene and provide expanded opportunities for new British writers.

Also out recently was the delayed second issue of *New Moon SF*, the large-format, glossy revamp of the erstwhile small-press *Dream* magazine (publisher Trevor Jones, 1 Ravenshoe, Godmanchester, Huntingdon, Cambs. PE18 8DE). This one may not appear as frequently as *Far Point*, and it may not be able to pay its contributors as generously, but it's a solid magazine with fiction from the likes of **Keith**

Brooke, **Eric Brown**, **Peter F. Hamilton** and **E.R. James**. Another delayed second issue (only about nine months late) was *Nexus*, which carries new fiction by **Geoff Ryman**, no less, as well as articles by **Colin Greenland**, **Bob Shaw** and other notables. It's perhaps advisable that you not submit fiction to this one, as it only publishes a couple of stories per issue and its frequency is in doubt; but it's well worth a read (editor Paul Brazier, PO Box 1123, Brighton BN1 6JS).

There are many other small-press sf magazines, among them *BBR*, *Exuberance* and *Scheherazade* (see reviews and mentions in past issues of *IZ*). One piece of advice to prospective contributors: your chances of acceptance will be much improved if you actually read the magazines concerned before you submit to them. This is called researching your market, and it's something which all too many would-be writers fail to do.

Critical Wave

Not infrequently, we are also asked to provide information on upcoming conventions and other social events in the worlds of sf, fantasy and horror. Unfortunately, these are so numerous that we can't afford the time or space to list or report on them all. (I'd like to say a belated thanks, though, to the organizers of "Trincon 400" in Dublin, February 1992, and to the committee of "Illumination," the British Easter SF Convention, in Blackpool, April 1992, for inviting me to represent *Interzone* at their very enjoyable events.)

One useful British source for all such information is the bimonthly news magazine *Critical Wave*. Edited by **Steve Green** and **Martin Tudor**, this is available for £7.50 per six issues from "Critical Wave Publications," 33 Scott Rd., Olton, Solihull, W. Midlands B92 7LQ (£10 Europe or \$25 USA, airmail). Recent issues not only list all upcoming conventions, but contain news of such events as the following...

The takeover of **Macdonald** publishers by the American company Little, Brown; the move of editor **John Jarrold** from Macdonald-as-was to Century/Legend, where he has taken up Deborah Beale's old job (Ms Beale, if you recall, has gone to edit sf at Anthony Cheetham's new publishing outfit, Orion); the bankruptcy of **Pegasus Publishing**, the Birmingham

company which issued such sf-related magazines as *Gamesman* and *Fantazia*; the fire which destroyed the **Book Inn**, a well-known Charing Cross Road, London, bookshop which specialized in sf (yes, some copies of *Interzone* were probably lost there);

...and so on. *Critical Wave* also contains copious news of forthcoming books and films; obituaries of writers such as Angela Carter and Isaac Asimov, and film-makers such as Irwin Allen and Jack Arnold; interviews with and short articles by those yet living; and much more. Recommended – this news-sheet's only serious failing is its relative infrequency: we could do with it every month.

(David Pringle)

Interaction

Dear Editors:

I think much of *Interzone*'s success – of which a 10th anniversary is adequate proof – lies in the catholicity of its range of fiction (and of its critical approach). This naturally means that readers may find some of its contents uncongenial, but will also find plenty to keep them happily faithful. And every so often, for every reader, along comes an item, or even an entire issue, to make him or her joyful and expectant of more of the same.

Why do I personally place the April anniversary issue in that most-rewarding category? Because so many of the stories are in themselves IZ-microcosmic, reflective of that distinctive catholicity of style and content. J.G. Ballard's "The Message from Mars," for example, starts, with overtones of traditional hard sf and satire, in the key of Ballard's own recent definition of the genre (in *Science-Fiction Studies* #55). He has there declared it "an exhilarating and challenging entertainment fiction..." Despite Ballard's deprecation (in that same journal) of any postmodern classification or interpretation, he, in the ending of that story, as the debris of years crumbles around his self-entombed and silent astronauts, is writing, perhaps *malgré lui*, postmodern fiction.

Again, both Robert Irwin's "The Monastery of Alcobaca" and Ian McDonald's "The Best and the Rest of James Joyce" are stories framed recognizably within sf conventions ("archival discoveries" and "alternative worlds" respectively); but each author employs his frame to give substance to frontier speculation: Irwin about thought-forms, language and information-transmission; McDonald about the inter-relationships of culture-forms, the subconscious and music. Culture-forms and the subconscious are also essential elements in the

integrative/disintegrative interplay of action and image in Storm Constantine's "Priest of Hands," a truly post-modern fantasy, but one using a thoroughly familiar sf vehicle ("the flying city"), which has ancestry stretching back through the Okie voyages to Laputa.

SMS's illustration of "Priest of Hands" quite remarkably emphasizes the story's eclecticism and seems through successive pages almost to trace a pattern of styles, relating them loosely to the narrative: first a suggestion of oriental utopia, then a Doré-like cliff of sombre masonry, succeeded by a tableau of art nouveau fantasy, concluding with a drama of personal tensions, wonderfully echoed by the tensions depicted between architectonic form and unbounded space, between rootedness and launching-out. Kevin Cullen's illustrations for the McDonald story complement that with equal brilliance, establishing links between traditional sf iconography and metaphors native to the late 20th century.

Add those blends of realism, fantasy and madness in the M. John Harrison and Graham Joyce stories, and you have a template for the "fiction" section of the magazine, which, granting a flexibility which might not exclude the harder sf or the rigours (and rigors) of *grand guignol*, could maintain *Interzone*'s individuality and success far into the future.

K.V. Bailey

Alderney, Channel Islands

Dear Editors:

I've been subscribing on and off to *Interzone* for five or six years (apart from a period of unemployment). And on the whole I'm quite happy with it.

The Storm Constantine story in issue 58 was great – the best story I've read from you in a long time. I like stories that are really atmospheric. I had a real sense of enclosed near-claustrophobic spaces. The ancient floating city laden with history and arcane rituals came across well. The final moment of transcendence was exciting. The characters did struggle to get there. Cathartic.

Paul A. Woodward

Birmingham

Dear Editors:

I would like to apologize for not getting around to filling in the Reader's Poll. The reason I have not written to you before is that I am generally happy with the standard of fiction provided by *Interzone*. The reason I am writing now is to plead the case for some of the stories that ended up at the bottom of the list, particularly Elizabeth Hand's "The Bacchae." Now personally I read sf because it is a medium which encourages the exploration of new ideas, or new ways of looking at old ideas, or else just challenges the way you think.

"The Bacchae" was one of those stories which make me glad I subscribe to IZ, because otherwise I would never have read it. The heavy irony is reminiscent of Muriel Spark's "The Driving Seat" (which is not really sf, but I heartily recommend it). Perhaps your largely male readership don't appreciate irony when they think it is directed at them. I am curious as to whether those who gave it a negative vote did so because they didn't understand it, or understood it and didn't like the message.

Another story which reinforced my enthusiasm for IZ was number 50 in the list, Alan Heaven's "The Hauler-In Susie M." I found the idea of a whole community based in an abattoir faintly disturbing. This is good – I want stories that make me think about my view of the world. I like well-written stories, with humour and clever plotting, and I would like you to continue printing stories like this, but the main reason I subscribe to *Interzone* is for the odd story which makes me think. Please carry on printing anything controversial.

Jane Carlton

Dear Editors:

Each month I buy *Interzone* off the shelf and wonder, "Should I take out a subscription?" After all, there's some good stuff: "The Staked Plain" by Boren (57), "WW3" by Di Filippo (55), "Bad Timing" by Brown (54), and the memorable "George and the Comet" by Baxter (52). Then I settle down to read the lead story and, a page later, decide that no way can I subscribe to this convoluted crap. Take for example, from the issues mentioned above, Egan's "Before" and "The Hundred Light-Year Diary"; doze to the drone of Brin's "What Continues, What Fails..."; wrestle with Mary Gentle's "Jerusalem." These are examples of storytelling at pretty near its worst. Reading fiction should be a pleasure, not a struggle or a bore.

Am I in the minority, or is this precisely why I have detected a shift, albeit a small one, in the type of stories *Interzone* has been publishing over the last half dozen issues or so?

I'm not a hard sf fan – mainly because I don't know enough about science; but I don't see why hard sf should be synonymous with bloody-hard-to-read sf. IZ seems to think it should be. Having said that, your mix of stories is better now than it was a while ago. Could this be because (1) You failed to impress the Americans enough, in the swap, to fork out extra cash; (2) *Far Point* and *New Moon* are nibbling at your heels? In my view you do need to continue this trend of diversification if IZ is not to be walking backwards.

David Logan

Newtownabbey, N. Ireland

Continued on page 21



Strips of coloured paper covered in Chinese writing hung suspended over a Soho doorway and flapped in the early autumn breeze. Wayne McKenzie sighed when he saw them. They meant that she was at it again. He'd find her upstairs, muttering something he couldn't understand and filling the apartment with smoke.

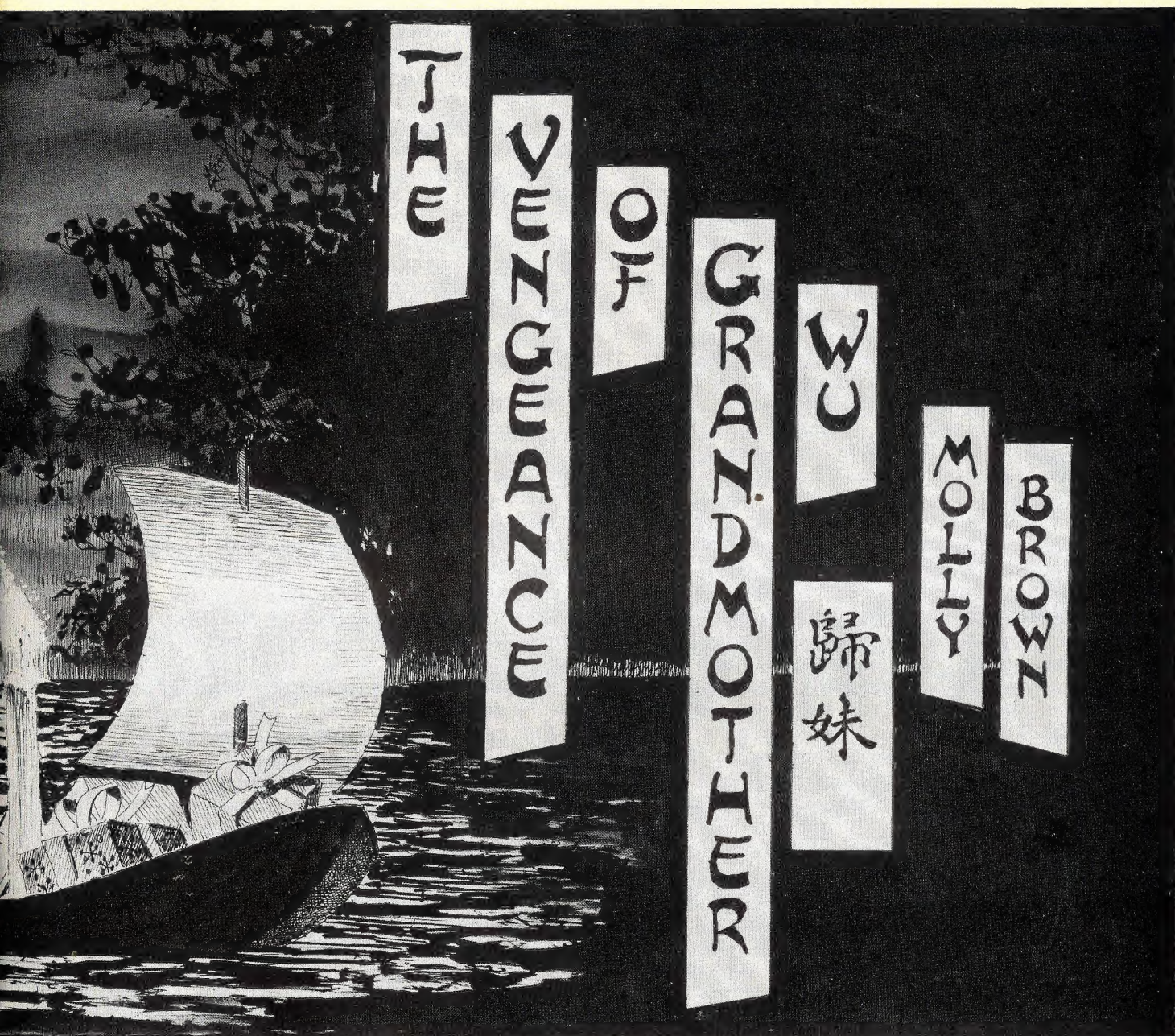
He wished his mother was still alive. She hadn't been able to control the old woman, but at least she could communicate with her. He spoke enough Cantonese to get by, but not enough to make his grandmother understand him when she didn't want to.

Like the time she'd started a bonfire in the middle of Shaftesbury Avenue. It took him ages to sort that one out with the police, and even longer to sort it out with her. She protested that the spirits would be angry if they didn't get their offerings, and Wayne explained, more in sign language than in Cantonese, that she must not burn her offerings in the street. He felt a sense of triumph when she nodded and went back upstairs, but his triumph was to be short-lived. From that day on, she burned her offerings in the living room.

Wayne nearly choked as he opened the door. She was standing in the middle of the sitting room, holding at least a dozen sticks of burning incense in one hand. With the other, she was dropping little rectangles of paper, hand-painted to resemble English money, into a small fire which raged inside a metal rubbish bin. "Grandmother, please! Someone will call the Fire Brigade."

She ignored him and dropped the remaining paper rectangles into the fire. She did this all the time. First she would cut the paper into pieces of the right size and shape. Then she would paint them green and draw the symbols for £5 or £10 or even £100 in the corners. Finally, she would burn them in the rubbish bin, adding to her grandson's conviction that she must be crazy.

Wayne often wondered how this woman could have given birth to his mother. They were so totally different. His mother had been soft and gentle. He used to think of her as fragile and almost translucent, like the dust on a butterfly's wings. Her death from cancer had seemed inevitable; she was never really



meant for this world. But this woman standing before him, his mother's mother, was four and a half feet of solid rock, strung together with wire. Ninety-six years old, with hair the colour of steel and eyes like two black raisins, she seemed as much a part of the earth as a mountain. She looked up as she dropped the last paper rectangle into the bin and told him that dinner would be ready in a minute.

"You know you don't have to cook for me, Grandmother," he said, following her into the kitchen. "I keep telling you we can have anything you want sent up from the restaurant."

She chose not to understand a word he was saying, and busied herself hacking vegetables into tiny pieces with a cleaver. Wayne walked back into the living room and opened all the windows. He stuck his head outside and took several deep breaths. How could the old woman stand all that smoke? His eyes and throat were burning, but it never seemed to bother her. If anything, she seemed to thrive on it.

The chopping in the kitchen stopped and he heard her half-singing some of her usual mumbo-jumbo. He

knew what she was up to. She was putting some food aside for the spirits. His father would never have put up with all this nonsense. Fifteen years in the Orient hadn't even made a dent in his practical and totally materialistic view of life.

Wayne had been seventeen when his father died, nearly twenty years earlier. He was there when it happened: he watched in amazement as his mother calmly addressed the corpse in the hospital bed and apologized for the fact that it would be impossible to cut a hole in the roof, but she would open a window for him. "Mother, what are you doing?" he asked her, thinking she'd gone mad with grief.

"Your father's spirit needs to be let out or he will stay trapped in this room," she explained, adding, "He has much farther to go yet. Soon we will help him on his way."

One night, several weeks after the funeral, Wayne's mother woke him hours before dawn and told him to get dressed, they were going out. She was wearing

her most expensive suit, her best pearls, and her highest heels. The leather bag she carried was her largest.

It was a clear, warm summer night. They walked for what seemed like ages, each wrapped up in their own thoughts. Wayne's thoughts were to do with his mother's mental state. First she'd insisted he go for a walk with her in the wee small hours, then she'd insisted he wear a suit. He really started to worry when they reached Hyde Park. Despite his insistence that she shouldn't go walking through the park at night, she kept on going. He had no choice but to follow her. She came to a halt at the edge of the Serpentine lake.

"Mother, why are we here?"

She signalled silence with a finger to her lips. She reached into her bag, pulled out a piece of cloth, and placed it on the ground. Then she adjusted her skirt and got down on her knees. She reached into the bag again and produced a little wooden boat with a sail made of paper. She placed this on the ground beside her and pulled out a candle and a box of matches. This was followed by several tiny gift-wrapped parcels and a folded one-pound note. Wayne watched intently as she carefully balanced the candle in the centre of the boat, surrounded by its gift-wrapped cargo. She whispered something that Wayne couldn't hear, lowered the boat into the water, and lit the candle. Then she gave the boat a gentle shove. The little boat floated away, and they eventually lost sight of it as the glow of the candle became indistinguishable from the light of the moon reflected on the water.

Finally, Mei-Lee McKenzie stood up and brushed a dead leaf away from her stocking. "Are you finished?" Wayne asked her. She nodded. "So what was all that about?"

Mei-Lee shook her head and then smiled a sad little half-smile at her son. "The flame of the candle," she began, "is your father's soul. I have launched him upon his journey to the world of the spirits."

"Mother," Wayne interrupted her, moaning in disbelief, "you've just launched a burning wax stick onto the Serpentine! Since when," he pointed across the water, "is Bayswater the world of the spirits?"

The telephone woke Wayne from his reverie. He answered it on the second ring.

"There's somebody here from Callahan's office. He's got the lease for number twenty-four." It was Sammy Chong, calling from the restaurant.

"I'll be right down." Wayne popped his head into the kitchen just in time to see his grandmother set the spirits' portion of food alight. "I have some business to take care of. You go ahead and have dinner; I'll grab something downstairs."

She looked up from her chopping board. "Stop him, Siao-Te," a voice said. "For his own good, you must stop him."

Wayne was halfway down the stairs when he turned around and saw his grandmother coming after him, still holding her cleaver. "What's the matter?"

"Don't go," she told him.

"I don't understand. What do you want?"

"Don't go."

"Grandmother, please go back upstairs. Someone's waiting for me."

"No. Bad things will happen."

Wayne ignored her and kept walking. Within seconds, she was at his side.

"Go back upstairs."

"I'm coming with you."

They reached the doorway that led into his office. He pointed to the cleaver, saying, "Give me that. You can't go walking into the restaurant carrying that thing!" There was a brief tug-of-war before she gave in and handed it over. He hid the cleaver in a desk drawer and then they headed into the dining room.

Sammy Chong was sitting with a middle-aged and overweight Western man at a table by the window. "Here comes my boss now," Sammy said. The man stood up and shook Wayne's hand.

"Wayne, this is Joe Simpson. He's Mr Callahan's partner."

"Nice to meet you," Joe Simpson said, pumping Wayne's hand up and down enthusiastically.

"This is my grandmother, Mrs Siao-Te Wu," Wayne said. "I'm afraid she doesn't speak any English."

"I see," Joe Simpson said, nodding. The man's huge stomach nearly burst through his shirt as he bent over to take one of Wu Siao-Te's hands and shake it solemnly. "It's very nice to meet you, Mrs Wu," he said slowly and loudly.

"Why is this fat man shouting at me?" Siao-Te asked Sammy Chong, who spoke much better Cantonese than her grandson.

"He thinks because you don't speak English, you must be deaf."

"And my grandson wants to do business with this idiot?"

"What's she saying?" Joe Simpson asked.

"She says it's nice to meet you, too."

They all sat down at the table and a uniformed waiter brought them the "Special Dinner For Four." Siao-Te didn't touch the food. She sat, watching and listening. "What's all this about?" she whispered to Sammy.

"Wayne wants to open an amusement arcade. This is the man who owns the lease," Sammy whispered back.

"Amusement arcade?"

"You know, where people play with machines. Video games and fruit machines."

Siao-Te nodded gravely. She'd seen these machines. People put in lots of money, little pictures moved around and when they stopped, people put in more money. Wayne should become rich owning these machines. So why was she worried?

"This will lead him into danger," the voice told her. "Don't let him sign those papers."

"Wayne," she said, "Do not sign any papers."

"Excuse me, Mr Simpson," Wayne said before turning away to see what his grandmother wanted. "What did you say?" he asked her in Cantonese.

"Don't sign any papers," she told him again.

"Grandmother, please!" He turned back to Joe Simpson, who handed him a pen. He signed his name in three places.

Siao-Te sighed and closed her eyes. Maybe it will be all right, she thought silently. "HMMPH!" said the voice.

The next morning, while Wayne was downstairs going over some invoices with Sammy, the old woman made her way into the street. Quite a few

heads turned as the tiny woman in cotton pyjamas hobbled by on feet that had been tightly bound from infancy until the day that she had dared to pull off the bandages and cause a scandal. Just as she had ignored the villagers who condemned her as a wicked woman for unwrapping her feet, she ignored those who stared after her now. She had business to attend to.

That afternoon, an elderly man in a grey business suit walked into the restaurant, placed his briefcase on one of the tables, and introduced himself to Sammy as Mr Han. He took out a compass and a notebook and began to survey the room, walking in a slow circle. "I see the kitchen faces to the West," he said. "That's very good."

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

Mr Han stopped. "Aren't you Wayne McKenzie?"

Sammy shook his head. "No, he's not here right now. But I'm the manager. Perhaps I can help you, if you'll just tell me what you want."

"There's nothing I want," Mr Han said gravely. "I'm here because Mrs Wu asked me to come."

"She did?"

"Yes. I'm here to check your *fung shui*."

"Just a minute. I'll get my boss."

Wayne picked up the telephone and listened. "There's a *what* man downstairs?"

"A *fung shui* man."

"Oh God, more superstitious nonsense. Thank him and tell him we don't require his services."

"He says your grandmother asked him to come."

"I'll be down in a minute." He slammed down the phone and shouted, "Grandmother!"

A short while later, Wayne, Sammy, Siao-Te and Mr Han were seated around a table. Wayne stared down at the table-cloth. Sammy tried hard not to laugh. Mr Han made notes on a pad and drew some diagrams. He explained that Wayne's desk was facing in the wrong direction; it should be turned around to encourage prosperity. He made some suggestions for symbols to hang on the wall and he was quite adamant about putting a fish tank at the front of the restaurant. That was very good *fung shui*.

Siao-Te interrupted to say that she wasn't worried about the restaurant; she knew it had good *fung shui*. It was the other place she was concerned about. Mr Han nodded. "Then I must look at this other place. Where is it?"

Siao-Te shrugged and said she didn't know. Then she turned and asked her grandson.

"Just down the street. At number twenty-four."

Siao-Te and Mr Han joined in a simultaneous gasp of horror.

"What's the matter?" Wayne asked in English.

The sight of the two old people with their mouths hanging open was too much for Sammy. He giggled.

"Very bad *fung shui*," Mr Han said grimly. "Very bad. Number four means death. With two in front you get 'easy death'."

"You're joking!"

Sammy was laughing out loud.

"No," Mr Han said. "I do not joke. You must not open a business at number twenty-four."

Wayne saw the look of horror in his grandmother's

eyes, the way her whole body had gone rigid, and he nearly laughed, too. "Look," he said, trying to keep his voice level. "There's more to a place than just the address, isn't there?"

Mr Han nodded, and rose up from the table. Soon he and Wayne were heading down the street with Siao-Te hobbling along beside them.

Wayne opened the door to number twenty-four with a flourish. "See. It's a nice big room with plenty of natural light. Fruit machines will go all along that wall there, games over there. I've ordered all the latest ones, really popular with the kids these days. Fortune-telling machine in the corner there, and a simulated ride to Mars in the middle. It's gonna be great; a real money-spinner."

Mr Han looked around and sighed. Everything was wrong. The room was the wrong shape. The storefront faced the wrong way and was at the apex of a T-junction: dreadful *fung shui*. A neighbouring building cast a shadow across it. And of course there was the number painted across the doorway; the number for easy death.

"Okay," Wayne said, humouring the man, "What do you suggest? How can I improve the *fung shui* here?"

Mr Han shook his head sadly and said there was nothing he could do; he wished he had been called in earlier, before Wayne had signed the lease. His only suggestion was that Wayne should lock the door behind him and leave the place empty.

"And how much do I owe you for your valuable time?" Wayne asked sarcastically.

"Nothing. I cannot help you." He muttered an apology to Siao-Te and then he left.

Wayne would have nothing to do with Mr Han's advice; he sneered and called it superstition. He had invested a lot of money; he'd already ordered the machines from a firm in Essex. He would go ahead exactly as planned. The only concession he would make was to put a fish tank in the restaurant, and that was only because he thought it would look nice.

That night, when she was alone in her room, the voice in Siao-Te's head couldn't resist telling her, "I told you so."

Yes, Siao-Te thought tiredly, you told me.

"You had your doubts, but I knew best, now didn't I?"

Yes, you were right. I should never have doubted, she thought in silent apology. She was getting a little annoyed with all this nagging. He never used to nag; maybe old age was affecting him, too. No, she reminded herself, age could not affect him.

"My love, my love. How could you ever doubt me, my love? Haven't I always been truthful with you?"

There was something about the way he said "my love" that still made her body tingle. Yes, Siao-Te nodded, you have never tried to deceive me. From their very first encounter, all those long years ago, he had been totally honest as to who and to what he was.

She was married at fourteen to a farmer named Wu Fung-Lao. He was a widower in his late forties who wanted someone young and strong to work in the fields and around the house, so a deal was struck with Siao-Te's parents, and the young girl found herself in the house of a stranger.

She spent her days bent over double in a field, and then she would enter the house towards evening, exhausted, and make the supper. Her husband barely spoke to her except to chide her for being lazy; his first wife had been a much better worker. When darkness fell, she would lie down beside him and grit her teeth at the feel of his hot sour breath and the clumsy mounting of her body. Later, as he snored beside her, she would dream the romantic dreams of a fourteen-year-old girl: of a heroic stranger who would rescue her from this living hell, of a man she could love.

The next day would bring the same routine: the daylight hours spent toiling in the fields, the evening with a man whose touch she despised, and the time of dreams, when she could be alone with the hero of her fantasies.

One evening, she came home from the fields, her back aching as usual and her husband waiting for his supper as usual, when an extraordinary thing happened. Her husband leapt into the air and stayed there, floating high above her head.

"Wu Fung-Lao!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

"I AM NOT WU FUNG-LAO!" roared a voice she had never heard before. She watched open-mouthed as the body of her husband turned cartwheels through the air and then stopped, hanging upside down. She cowered in terror as her husband's face became engorged with blood, the skin turning redder and redder, the eyes so huge she feared that they would pop right out.

"Stop!" she cried. "Please put him down."

Her husband spun right-side-up and dropped until he hovered only an inch from the ground. His mouth opened wide and a series of animal sounds came from his throat, everything from the cluck of a chicken to the roar of a lion. "DO YOU SEE MY POWER?" boomed the voice, the voice that was not her husband's.

"Yes, I see your power," she whispered.

"HA!" boomed the voice as the body of her husband touched the floor and stood with arms spread in a gesture of triumph.

"Who are you?"

"I AM A DEMON, COME FROM THE NETHER-WORLD TO TORMENT THE LIVING." Her husband's body rose into the air once again.

She ran to the door, but it wouldn't open. She tried to scream, but the scream stuck somewhere in the back of her throat. She collapsed to the floor, trembling. She clutched at her knees, and rolled herself into a ball, rocking back and forth with her eyes closed. There was a long silence, and then a voice said, "Please don't do that." Siao-Te froze. "Don't be afraid," the voice continued. "I won't harm you."

Siao-Te didn't move, didn't open her eyes. "Why," she whispered shakily, "why are you doing this to me?"

"I will do nothing to you. I can see you are just a child."

Her eyes snapped open. "I am not a child!"

The demon chuckled sadly. "You are. Even though I am condemned to wander as a demon, I will not torment a child."

"I am not a child. I am a married woman."

"Married to this?" The demon indicated the body of Wu Fung-Lao with a sweep of her husband's arm.

He shook her husband's head and clucked in pity. "And I thought I was the miserable one."

Siao-Te straightened her back and looked directly at him. It was still her husband's face, but with an expression she had never seen. He looked almost wistful.

"I didn't think demons were miserable. I thought they were bitter and vengeful."

"I am that as well," the demon replied.

"Have you always been a demon?" Siao-Te's eyes were wide with interest. She'd totally forgotten to be afraid.

"No, not always." He looked at her and smiled, a sad little half-smile. "Come nearer, and you shall hear what I have told no other living person."

Siao-Te moved closer, and the demon told her the source of his bitterness and his misery: his name was Zhang-Cho and he had been a soldier and personal bodyguard to an emperor of the Wei dynasty. There was an attempt on the emperor's life, and Zhang-Cho alone fought off seven swordsmen. But the eighth drove a blade through his heart, wrenching his spirit from his body less than one week before the day he was to marry. The violence of his sudden death and the anger he felt about missing his wedding had combined to make him a demon, stalking the earth for victims to possess and torment.

"I had only twenty-two years before my life was stolen from me, and I never had a wife. Now those whose lives have not yet been stolen must bear my wrath."

"And this is how you show your wrath? To take another's body?"

"Yes."

"And do you ever give the body back?"

"Of course! That's the whole point."

"I don't understand."

"It's always the same. The victim and his family agree to worship me. Then they build an altar in the centre of the room with incense burning at all times, and I receive regular offerings of food and money."

"That makes you leave?"

"And I never come back."

Zhang-Cho, the demon, watched her through her husband's eyes while she sat on the floor with her chin in her hand, thinking. She had a problem. She liked the demon a lot more than she liked her husband, and he seemed to like her, too. And he'd said he was only twenty-two years old when he was killed.

"Demon," she said.

"Yes?"

"What do you look like?"

"I am a spirit."

"I know...but what did you look like? It's hard to know how to talk to you when all I can see is the body of my husband."

The demon told her to close her eyes once more. She did, and in her mind's eye he stood before her in silken robes and gleaming armour, brandishing a sword which he placed at her feet with an exaggerated bow. She felt as though she could reach out and touch his topknot of thick black hair. Then the demon raised his head and she saw into his eyes.

Siao-Te had fallen into a whirlpool and there was nothing she could do about it. She might scream and flail her arms, but she knew it wouldn't save her. She

knew she was drowning, and she didn't care if she ever came up for air again. "Demon," she whispered.

"Yes?"

"If worshipping you will make you leave, then I don't want to worship you."

"Then it is my turn to ask you a question."

"Yes?"

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to leave."

"Why should I stay?"

"Because..." Siao-Te hesitated, gathering all her courage. "Because I want to be your wife."

One day, a Mrs Tan walked into her house to find her husband floating near the ceiling. "Tan Lo-Hua!" she shouted. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I am not Tan Lo-Hua," replied a weedy little voice nothing like her husband's. "I am Wu Fung-Lao, the farmer, and I have been cast out of my own home by my wicked wife and her demon lover."

"Puh!" Mrs Tan spat in disgust. "You lying spirit! I saw Wu Fung-Lao the farmer just today, in the village with his pretty young wife. It does my heart good to see two people so obviously in love. How can you tell such evil lies with her expecting a baby any time now?"

She sent for a priest, who prodded the possessed body with needles until the spirit of Wu Fung-Lao promised to go away and never come back.

Meanwhile, people in the village began to talk. Wasn't it strange, they wondered out loud, the way Wu Fung-Lao looked younger every day? At forty-five, he'd been a scrawny matchstick of a man. Now at fifty-one, he had the strength of ten with muscles to match. And he'd always had such a scratchy little voice, nothing like the deep rumble he spoke with these days. Many in the village thought these were signs of evil doings. Others, like Mrs Tan, said these were merely the effects of love.

The time finally came when the body of Wu Fung-Lao could stand no more. The years had taken their toll, despite the best efforts of the demon. Skin shrivelled, arteries clogged, and bones became brittle. The heart that once belonged to a farmer named Wu Fung-Lao was worn out after seventy-nine years of beating, and wanted to stop.

Zhang-Cho told his wife that it was time for him to go. He lay down on their bed and closed his eyes.

"No, you can't leave me."

"I must. This body refuses to hold me."

"Then find another."

But he told her that though he did not want to leave her, he was no longer bitter and now swore that he would not take another's body against his will. He had found what he'd searched for through centuries of torment and wandering: the normal lifespan and the happy marriage he had once been robbed of. The last statement to come from the throat of the former Wu Fung-Lao was that he would always love her.

Siao-Te did not cut a hole in the roof for Zhang-Cho's spirit, or even open a window. Instead, she went around the house and sealed up every opening she could find.

"Zhang-Cho!" she called from the middle of the



room, "You cannot leave me. I have blocked every exit so there is no way out. You said you would never take another's body against their will - I tell you now that it is my will. Make my body your new home."

A soft breeze blew against her ear. "How can I, my darling? I would never cast you out of yours."

"You don't need to. My body may be small, but I have room in here for two."

And that is how Zhang-Cho the demon came to live inside her head.

Wayne ordered a giant fish tank and an assortment of brightly-coloured tropical fish. When they arrived, they were given a prominent display just inside the front door. He even turned the desk in his office around and covered the walls with the various symbols suggested by Mr Han. He showed all this to his grandmother in an attempt to appease her, but she just shook her head and said it wasn't enough. He must abandon his plans for number twenty-four. This was the one thing he refused to do.

The machines arrived and were installed. Two men, Colin and Ahmed, were hired to work alternate shifts making change and guarding against vandalism. Siao-Te said nothing, and waited.

The first few months were uneventful; the trouble began on the night that Colin caught someone breaking into one of the machines. Colin was a big man, and sometimes he got rough. He got rough that night. It was less than two hours before a gang of eight came in with crowbars. Every machine was emptied, and Colin was taken away in an ambulance.

There were demands for protection. Wayne refused to pay. Three men came in and held Ahmed down while a fourth smashed the simulated ride to Mars into pieces.

Wayne kept all this a secret from his grandmother. He didn't want to frighten her, and he didn't want to hear her say "I told you so." He hardly saw her, anyway. He was always either in his office or at the police station, trying to get them to do something. Siao-Te spent most of her time in her bedroom, alone with the voice in her head.

She didn't need Zhang-Cho to tell her something was wrong. She could see the worry in her grandson's eyes.

On a Wednesday night, at three minutes to midnight, eleven men in balaclavas rushed into the restaurant. They had long knives as long as swords and they had guns. Sammy Chong was knocked on the head with the butt of a pistol. Wayne was slashed by eleven knives before he was shot twice in the chest.

"Mrs Wu! Mrs Wu!"

She stumbled to the door. "What is it?"

"Your grandson killed! Masked men shoot him!"

Her eyes went blank and she collapsed. The waiter was terrified the shock had killed her.

"Mrs Wu! Mrs Wu! Are you all right?" He grabbed her wrist and felt for a pulse. He should never have told her. He should have left it to someone else. Tears streamed down his face. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs Wu!"

A cold wind swept up the stairway and into the living room. The waiter's hair flew into his eyes, temporarily blinding him. A man's voice thundered from somewhere above him, "I HAVE SEEN HIM AND HE

IS NOT DEAD!" The old woman's pulse leapt into action beneath the waiter's trembling fingers. She opened her mouth and the thundering voice came from her throat: "TAKE THE WOMAN TO HIM!"

The waiter screamed and ran, leaving the old woman lying on the floor.

Siao-Te rubbed her eyes and sat up slowly. "Don't worry, my love," the voice whispered, "I will help you downstairs."

She walked into the restaurant and into chaos. Tables were overturned, glass was broken, and men with notebooks were everywhere. Wayne's beautiful fish tank had been demolished. No one seemed to notice the old woman until she paused in front of a large red stain.

"Hey, get her away from there! How'd she get in here, anyway?"

One of the kitchen staff explained that she was the owner's grandmother.

"Oh, I'm sorry," one of the policemen told her. "Hawkins here will drive you to the hospital."

She shook her head uncomprehendingly, and someone was dragged over to translate. She nodded to the policeman named Hawkins. He took her arm and led her towards the doorway, pausing while she leaned over to pick up one of the tropical fish that still flopped its tail on the carpet.

Wayne hovered at the edge of a cliff. He heard voices. Many voices. Some shouted; some wept. Some called to him in Chinese and some in English. "Come to us," they told him. "Be one of us." He stepped off the edge and floated gently downwards. "Down you come, Wayne," the voices whispered. "Down to us who were forced from our bodies before our time. Down to us who stalk the earth and seek revenge. Down to..."

The voices stopped. Wayne stopped as well. Something had caught him in mid-fall. It was a hand; he was sure of that. He felt the fingers digging into his shoulder. For a moment he hung suspended. Then the hand tightened its grip and pulled him back up, to the edge of the cliff. A bed was waiting for him there.

It was three days before they let her see him. Even then, they warned her through an interpreter not to expect much. "You can go in and sit with him," they told her, "but don't try to make him speak. He needs his rest."

Siao-Te hobbled into the room where her grandson was wrapped up like a mummy and held together by tubes connected to bottles of coloured liquid. She stood by the side of his bed and looked down. His breathing was shallow and his eyes were closed. "Zhang-Cho," she thought angrily, "look what they have done to your grandson. You, an honoured warrior and personal bodyguard to the emperor! You, a fearsome demon of the netherworld! Do not tell me you will stand for this!"

"NO!" the voice of Zhang-Cho thundered in her head. "I WILL NOT!"

Unable to speak, unable to move, with massive doses of drugs coursing through his system, Wayne's senses had never been more acute. He heard everything. He saw everything there was to see without even opening his eyes. He saw his grandmother now,

standing beside his bed. And he saw the young man standing behind her. He'd never seen anyone like him.

The man's hair was long and black and tied into a knot upon his head. His beard was long also, and it was trimmed to a point. And his clothes! Wayne shook his head in amazement, though of course his head never moved. He'd only seen robes like that in a museum. Wayne puckered his lips to whistle in appreciation (though his mouth never moved), but then he thought better of it. The young man might take it the wrong way. Whoever the guy was, he certainly didn't seem in any mood to kid around. His thick brows were furrowed with anger and his teeth were bared in a snarl. Wayne could have sworn he saw sparks flashing from the young man's eyes, even though the logical side of his brain was aware that such a thing was impossible; he must be asleep and dreaming. Still the guy was huge. Dream or not, Wayne told himself, you'd have to be crazy to upset a guy like that.

As the old woman stepped into the street outside the hospital, the voice inside her head repeated for the third time, "YES! I agree our grandson must be avenged, but I am worried about you. I will not let you put yourself into danger."

"What do I care about danger? I am an old woman, and it is time for me to die."

"No, you are still the little girl who rolled herself into a ball with fear at the sound of a demon's voice."

"That little girl is dead. She died the day you left the body of Wu Fung-Lao the farmer."

"I will not let you do this."

"Zhang-Cho, I will do what must be done, and if you will not help me I will do it alone."

The demon had no choice but to give in. "All right," he said, "you shall have your vengeance."

There were preparations to be made. Siao-Te walked into the restaurant and asked the cashier for money. When she told him how much she wanted, he had to send a waiter to the bank. She made a mark on the cashier's receipt and took the money upstairs. She went into her room and lit several sticks of incense at the altar opposite the foot of her bed. She drew a portrait of Zhang-Cho, which she mounted on the wall. Then she drew a picture of a horse. She held a match to it, and dropped it into a metal bowl with flame and smoke seeming to pour from the animal's nostrils. Then she burned the money one note at a time.

"Rest now, my darling," Zhang-Cho told her. "Later we will need all your strength."

She lay down on her bed and closed her eyes while Zhang-Cho went to equip himself.

"Mother?"

"Is that you, Mei-Lee?"

"Mother, you must not do this."

"Mei-Lee, he is your son. Don't you want vengeance?"

"No, Mother. He isn't dead. He is going to live; I made sure of that."

"So it was you that caught him."

"He had no preparation for death. He would have become a demon."

Siao-Te said nothing.



"Mother, if you do what you are planning, you will become a demon yourself."

"Daughter, I am one already."

Zhang-Cho returned that evening with everything they needed. He had already seen the gang's headquarters; he would lead Siao-Te to it.

The old woman rose from her bed, washed her face, tied back her hair, and stepped into her tiny shoes. As she reached the street, Zhang-Cho told her one last time that she did not need to do this. She ignored him and kept walking. Soon she turned into a dark alleyway, walked past a sign reading "Keep Out" in both English and Cantonese, and headed down a flight of stairs. She stopped in front of a steel-reinforced basement door. She knocked three times. A panel slid back and a pair of eyes appeared. They crinkled in amusement at the sight of the tiny woman. The door opened.

"How can I help you, grandmother?" a man asked her with mock politeness. He spoke Cantonese; the dragon tattooed on his chest was clearly visible beneath his thin cotton shirt.

"I am looking for someone."

"You won't find him here, grandmother."

"I will look, just the same."

Someone laughed and said, "Let her come in, then."

The man who'd opened the door bowed as he let her past, and then bolted the door. The place was obviously an illegal drinking club; a bar ran along one wall. There wasn't much light; just a single bulb.

Siao-Te walked to the centre of the room and looked around. She counted eleven men, all young. All big. Most wore jeans and tee-shirts. Some wore leather jackets. Several of them were sitting on stools at the bar. Three sat around a table. The rest stood, glaring at her. One, who couldn't have been older than seventeen, spat at a spot on the floor only inches from the old woman's feet. Then he smiled and went back to cleaning his fingernails with a long knife that was more like a sword.

The twelfth man entered the room through a beaded doorway. He was older than the others, maybe forty. He wore a suit and a tie and a large jewelled ring. "What's going on?" he demanded. "Who let her in here?"

Zhang-Cho whispered in Siao-Te's ear, "This is the man who ordered our grandson's execution."

The man beside the door shrugged. "She said she's looking for someone."

"And I have found him," Siao-Te said, staring at the man in the suit.

The boy who'd been cleaning his fingernails giggled.

"Shut up! All right, old woman. Just who the hell are you and what do you want?"

"I come from The House of Wu restaurant, and what I want is vengeance."

Eleven knife blades glistened under the light provided by a single bulb. Eleven pairs of hands and feet moved closer.

The man in the suit contemplated the tips of his fingers. "I'm sorry, old woman. But you leave me no choice."

"NOW!" boomed the voice of Zhang-Cho. Siao-Te

opened her mouth and a gleaming sword rose from the back of her throat, wielded by the arm of a giant.

Outside, the evening was mild, with just a hint of a breeze, and though it was quite late, the sun still hovered above the western horizon, giving the sky a brilliant pink and orange glow. It was the height of the summer tourist season, and the streets of Soho were packed with people from around the world. Three Germans were entering a pub, a group of Japanese were stepping off a coach, an Arab was hailing a taxi, and a married couple from Kansas were trying to decide on a restaurant. Then one of the West End musicals finished its evening performance and even more people spewed out onto the streets.

In such a crowd, no one paid much attention to the three men running frantically down the street. But one second later, the theatre crowd stopped dead in their tracks, the Germans ran back into the street, the taxi hailed by the Arab smashed into a lamp-post, the Japanese reached for their cameras, and no one said a word except for the man from Kansas, who actually said three: "Oh my Gawd!"

A man was charging down Shaftesbury Avenue on horseback, a sword held between his teeth. His robes were silk of imperial yellow, embroidered with threads of solid gold. The last rays of the sun reflected in his metal helmet and breastplate with such intensity that it was painful to look at him. Still, no one turned away. Every head turned to watch him. Every eye devoured him. He was magnificent.

One of the three men tripped and fell. His head fell away with one swooping stroke of the warrior's sword as the horse, breathing fire, leapt over him. A second stroke sent another head rolling beneath the wheels of a number 19 bus.

The next stroke removed the third man's shirt. The dragon on his chest clearly visible, he shoved a messenger off his motor-cycle and roared away, closely pursued by the giant on horseback.

"Golly," said the woman from Kansas. She watched the two of them turn right into a side street and then right again into the congested traffic of Regent Street.

There was utter chaos as cars, buses and people did their best to get out of the way. The horse leapt effortlessly over those that didn't. There was a roar of triumph that could be heard for miles and a final sweep of the gleaming sword.

The last severed head smashed through the window of Hamley's toy store and landed on the shoulder of a giant teddy bear. The motor-cycle and its headless rider didn't stop until Oxford Circus.

The horseman turned back and vanished into a maze of side streets. The woman from Kansas ran to the corner to watch him go. Later, she swore that he became transparent and gradually faded from view. Her husband took her back to their hotel to lie down.

The police were on the scene within seconds, but found no trace of the man or his horse.

When Siao-Te got back to the restaurant, they had to help her up the stairs. "Mrs Wu, what happened? You're covered in blood." But she wouldn't answer.

A doctor was called, and he said she was suffering from shock and exhaustion. One of the waitresses came to stay in the flat and take care of her.

The papers were full of varying eyewitness accounts of the mystery horseman, and the fact that the police were linking the murders on Shaftesbury Avenue with the apparent "gangland revenge" slaying of nine men in a Soho basement. Most had criminal records, either in Britain or in Hong Kong, and each one had been beheaded. The first policeman to enter the basement fainted at the sight of nine severed heads impaled on empty lager bottles, lined up in a row across the bar top. Strangely, none of the many photographs taken of the horseman had come out, but there was an artist's impression of him on every front page as well as on television.

The police were regular visitors to Wayne's bedside. They showed him the artist's impression of the man seen riding around Soho on a fire-breathing horse, and demanded to know who he was.

"I have no idea who he is. I've never seen him before." He'd forgotten about his dream.

"Wasn't this a revenge killing, arranged by you?"

"How could I arrange it? I was unconscious."

Finally, the doctors decided that Wayne was well enough to go home. He arrived at the restaurant in a taxi. Sammy helped him get upstairs.

The first thing he did was to look in on his grandmother. He'd heard she was ill; but he wasn't prepared for what he saw. She was a skeleton only loosely covered by translucent flesh.

"Grandmother," he whispered.

She didn't need to open her eyes to see him. He was thin and weak and scarred, and there were stitches in his chest, but he would be all right. "Wayne," she said, "I have only struggled to hold this body so that I would see you once more, and know that you will be well again and not become a demon."

"What?" She's rambling, he thought. She must have a fever.

"The next time you die," she whispered. "You must be ready for it."

He caught a glimpse of Siao-Te's altar out of the corner of one eye, and then he turned to stare at it open-mouthed. He knew that she had one in her room and that she burned incense and left little offerings there, but he'd never noticed the drawing pasted on the wall. "Grandmother, who is this?"

She still didn't open her eyes. "Your grandfather."

He frowned. "My grandfather? No! The police came to the hospital. They showed me pictures of this man. He killed a dozen people! Who is he?"

"Help me to sit up."

He gently pulled her forward and piled some pillows behind her head. Paper. She was thin and light as paper. Where had those muscles of solid rock disappeared to?

"Now, grandson. I will tell you everything."

When the body of Wu Siao-Te would no longer hold her spirit, Wayne apologized to the corpse for the fact that he could not cut a hole in the roof for her, but explained that he would open a window.

Three weeks later, on a cloudless and chilly autumn night, Wayne knelt by the edge of the Serpentine and shoved a tiny wooden boat across the water. It carried two lit candles: one for his grandmother and one for the demon.



Molly Brown makes her second appearance in *Interzone* with the above piece. Her first, "Bad Timing" (issue 54), won the British SF Association award as best short story of 1991. She has also sold stories to various original anthologies of crime fiction and fantasy. She lives in London, and we should be hearing a good deal more of her.

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HEADLINE
FEATURE

Fragments

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Once upon a time, my mother told me, back in the Dead And Gone, there was a land called California, where the sun always shone, and it was always warm, and it never rained; where the people were beautiful, and everyone had a great big car that could drive as fast as the wind, and there were good roads everywhere to drive them on. And in California was a place called Hollywood, or maybe Holywood, and that was where all the dreams came from.

And people didn't dream their dreams alone in bed, inside their heads, the way we do now; they watched them unfold as coloured pictures, larger than life, brighter than life, on great silver screens that hung in theatres, above the stage, or in magic boxes called "videos" that they kept in their houses. And the dreams always had happy endings, and they always made sense – virtue triumphed, and evil was punished, and true love won out in the end.

I've never been sure how to take my mother's stories – I mean, it all just sounds like a fairy tale, or an allegory of some kind, but she didn't seem to mean it that way. Even when I asked her straight out, she insisted that California was real, in the Dead And Gone, and Hollywood was real – but she changed the story, said that they didn't really make dreams there, they made films, or movies, or videotapes, or television, and when I asked her what all those things meant she couldn't explain.

They were all just other names for dreams, she said.

And maybe Hollywood wasn't exactly real real, she would say, it was all sort of fake, but it wasn't made up, and then she would get confused, or I would.

So maybe dreams used to be different, I don't know.

I asked my mother once what happened to California, and she said she didn't know. I asked her if it was still there, just all ruined, and she said she didn't know. It might have fallen into the sea, she said.

She didn't know.

I was reading a book we found – it still had the back cover and almost all the pages. I don't read very well, because I've never had time to work at it, and there isn't all that much to read anyway, but I read this book. It talked about a place called Atlantis that sank into the sea.

I asked my mother if Atlantis was another name for California.

She burst out crying, and wouldn't talk to me for hours.

When she would talk to me again, she told me that California was real, and Atlantis wasn't; that California was still there fifty years ago, and Atlantis had been gone for at least two thousand; that there are lots of made-up places that sank, like Lemuria and Mu and Numenor, and Atlantis is just one of them.

I don't understand any of it. Why would people make up places like that? Why are there so many? If Atlantis wasn't real, how could it have sunk two thousand years ago?

I asked my mother if she was ever in California before it sank, and she got angry again.

"It didn't sink," she said. "Or maybe it did."

She wouldn't say if she'd ever been there.

We found videotapes today. Videotapes are brittle black box shapes.

I though videotapes were a kind of dream, but my mother says these black things are videotapes.

They aren't dreams; they're just black plastic. They don't seem to be much use; they aren't strong enough to build anything. They're shiny, though.

We were taking apart a car, and my mother yelled at us.

"Not that one!" she said. "That's a fifty-six shevvie, it might be the last one in the world!"

I told her we needed hoses and pipes, and steel springs for weapons, and wheels, and that we wanted the oil to burn for heat, and she said, "Yes, that's fine, but not that one! Can't you find any others?"

Lindsey and I didn't see what difference it made, but we decided we could let my mother have one car for herself. There are plenty of cars, though most of them have a lot more pieces missing.

When we left her there, she was sitting inside it, holding the wheel thing and talking to herself.

When Lindsey first found Stuart he tried to rape her, but we didn't mind, really. Anybody would have, in that situation. She ran away from him, and we went back together and talked to him. We figured we could probably trade with him – just about any time we find someone new there are things we have that they want, and things they have that we want.

All Stuart said he wanted was sex with Lindsey.

We thought it over, but Lindsey didn't like him very much, so we said we didn't think so.

But I could see he had a lot of good things – he had

aluminium pans, and lights that were much brighter than ours. So I asked if he would like to meet my mother – with us as chaperones, on neutral ground, of course, in case she didn't like him, either.

But she *did* like him. She sent us both away almost at once, and we walked off, leaving the two of them sitting on a block of concrete, talking about computers. Old people all seem to know about computers, but none of them can explain very well what they were for, and I've never figured it out. There are a lot of things from the Dead And Gone that are like that; it makes it very hard to understand the old people, sometimes.

We had a computer once, but the battery died when I was a baby.

My mother lived at Stuart's place for months. She liked it there, with the aluminium pans to cook in and the lights that were bright enough to read by.

"He's got a generator," she told us. I don't know if it was true. I never saw it.

Lindsey and I didn't move in there with them; we liked having our own private place, and Stuart and my mother liked having *their* own private place. We didn't have bright lights run by a generator, we just had old car batteries that kept our old lights glowing, but that was enough. And I cooked in the same pots I always had.

We didn't see Stuart that often, so it took some time before we realized how irritated he was getting.

When I saw his hand was bloody, I asked how it happened.

"I hit a wall," he said.

I looked at his hand.

I'd seen people hit walls before; when we were with the Chicago tribe there was a man who hit walls when things went wrong. I looked at Stuart's hand, and I knew he hadn't hit anything just once.

"Are you and Mom getting along okay?" I asked.

He looked at me sideways, like I'd just shown I was smarter than he thought.

"No," he said. I nodded.

"I thought you two would have fun together, talking about the Dead And Gone. And the other thing, of course."

"We did," Stuart said. "Really, we did. But she won't talk about anything *else*."

I blinked, and thought about that.

"What else is there?" I asked.

My mother came to find us. She was crying. Stuart was packing to go; he said she could have the old place, he'd find a new one. She wasn't invited to come with him. He would leave the aluminium pans, too.

I went to talk to him – "man to man," my mother called it.

"Georgie," he said when he saw me. "I thought she might send you."

I nodded.

"Well, it won't do any good, but I don't mind talking to you," he said, as he heaved bundles onto his cart.

"Then why are you going?" I asked.

"Because I can't stand listening to her any more," he told me. "Because all she talks about is the Dead And Gone."

"Well, what else should she talk about?" I asked, puzzled.

"Well, how about what's yet to come?" he asked, pushing the bundles neatly into place.

"What do you mean? Nothing's left to come."

"What about tomorrow?" he asked.

"What about it? It'll be just like today."

"Will it? Why?"

"Because..."

I didn't have an answer. It just always had been. Ever since I was born, everything had been the same. Oh, the weather changed, it was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, sunny some days and rainy on others; I grew up; some days hunting was good, some days it was poor; but nothing really changed.

"Georgie," Stuart said, "Your mother saw a lot of movies as a kid, and I think she remembers every single one of them, but she never got the point."

"What point?"

"The people in the movies never did what your mother *does*," he said. "They never sat around waiting for life to happen to them. They went out and *made* things happen."

"But that was in the Dead And Gone," I said. "Dreams were different then."

He looked at me, and it was a funny look, as if he thought I'd been hurt or something.

"No," he said. "The world was different then, all right – but people were the same, and dreams were the same. Those are two things that really don't change." He pulled some straps tight across his cart. "People change the world with their dreams, but people don't change, and dreams don't change."

"No, my mother told me," I said. "People watched dreams together, she said."

He made a face.

"That's what she does now," he said. "She sits there, watching the old dreams in her head and telling me all about them." He sighed.

"Georgie," he said, "I want my own dreams, new dreams." He picked up the pulling bar.

"I guess it's because you're from before," I said.

He left.

I didn't tell my mother what Stuart had said; I just told her he was gone. She cried for a while.

Dreams don't change the world. My mother has plenty of dreams. I don't, but she does.

Sometimes she sits in her car, talking to people who aren't there, pretending it's going down the road as fast as the wind.

Cars don't run any more. My mother says it's because there isn't any gasoline, but I don't think that's why. I think it's because the Dead And Gone is dead and gone. All the old dreams and the old magic are dead, and we need to live in the here and now.

My mother tries to live in the Dead And Gone, but she can't. She wants to live in California, I think. Stuart tried to live somewhere else, too, I guess – someplace that's never existed.

Atlantis, maybe.

But most people live here and now. I do. Lindsey does. Our baby does – we named her Shevvie, to please my mother.

Really, you know, it's a good world, a young world. Why would we want to change it?

The Cult of Loving Kindness

Nick Griffiths talks to Paul Park

Paul Park is a complex character. His life appears to be shaped by disorder and ruled by snap decisions. One day, bored with his steady job and desperate to finish his first novel, he packed his bags and went travelling. Park is a now-you-see-him-now-you-don't sort of character. The sort of person who has a great story to tell.

We met shortly before Christmas of last year, by the Country & Western section of a large Oxford Street record store (his choice). He would be wearing a green duffle coat and carrying a rucksack.

The actual setting for the interview was to be chosen when we met. This is a man whose novels explore religion and the negative effects of colonization, the impossibility of true communication; a man who has travelled extensively through Asia and Africa, learning about different cultures and spirituality. The only place open and quiet enough for the interview was Burger King.

Paul Park is a tall, square-jawed American with neat blond hair and small Lennon specs. His physique, a legacy of his years as a squash professional and health club manager, looked oddly out of place in the tacky, glitzed-up restaurant, with its piped Christmas carols and overweight clientele.

Two of Park's novels have been published in the UK: the first two parts of his "Starbridge Chronicles," *Soldiers of Paradise* and *Sugar Rain*. His other books, the final part of the Starbridge trilogy, *The Cult of Loving Kindness*, and a fourth novel, *Turn Away Turn Back*, are scheduled to follow.

Park prefers the term speculative fiction to science fiction in categorizing his novels. "Actually, I think fiction is a good term," he laughs. "I don't really think that fiction should be ghettoized because it's about a certain subject matter. Essentially, the only difference is in settings. Science fiction or speculative fiction is such an enormous genre, but it doesn't say anything of what a book's about or what its themes are. So as long as you're going to have a label that really doesn't tell you anything, you ought to have the most general label possible.

"I would love it if there was no such thing as genre writing, because – at least in the US – everything is so divided according to how it is marketed that you're missing out on a lot

of people who would respond to your work the best. On the other hand, I have a lot of friends who write more general fiction; their books come out and they just die because there's such a big market and there's no reason to buy it."

He identifies with writers like Gene Wolfe, Kim Stanley Robinson and Jim Morrow. "There's a philosophical break between writers who think that writing science fiction is different from writing any other kind of fiction. Essentially, the ordinary literary values take away from sf writing because there should be something pure about the essence of a science-fiction idea that is changed or deluded if you bring in the techniques appropriate to other kinds of mainstream writing."

Both *Soldiers of Paradise* and *Sugar Rain* combine science/speculative fiction and fantasy, and concern the revolt against the royal leaders of the city-state of Charn. In them, Park often uses metaphor to parallel the decaying state of the world today. They are subtly political books, with environmental and sociological messages hidden between their lines. It comes as no surprise to learn that Paul Park grew up during the 1960s.

"I was a little young to have my political consciousness shaped during that decade, but certainly my social conscience was," he says. "When I was growing up in the 60s, if you adopted that badge of long hair, dressed in denims, listening to rock 'n' roll, smoking dope and doing drugs, it meant that almost everybody in the country was your enemy. I remember so vividly going into a restaurant and realizing that everybody hated me, and almost rejoicing in that, taking some strength from it.

"So there was a hopefulness in that part of it, and another kind of thinking – which I don't think people growing up nowadays have – which is: I really, genuinely thought that when I was my age now, 37, the world would be an incredibly different place, and there wouldn't be any governments or armies or wars or marriages. None of that would exist because the people who were interested in doing those things would all have died and all the new people coming up would want to do something else."

He pauses for breath, briefly. "I

remember having that belief change around 1972, 1973. I picked up someone hitch-hiking who had the whole paraphernalia: long hair, denims, the jacket sort of ripped up. And this guy was a jerk, a total idiot, and not only that but he was practically a Republican. He was a racist, a bigot, a sexist. It was like he was wearing the uniform but he had betrayed it.

"In 1972, in the US, you were on a wave generated by your own crazy, drug-induced frame of mind. We always thought that people were going to push you forward. At first it was just these small places, then these values were spreading in the community. The Vietnam War was over, people had rejected it, and the world was changing. Then it seemed to dry up. It was like a recession, and it all dried up from behind you. It was as if you were left on a beach – now you're just an old hippie."

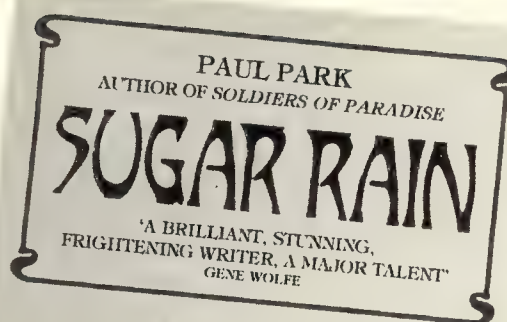
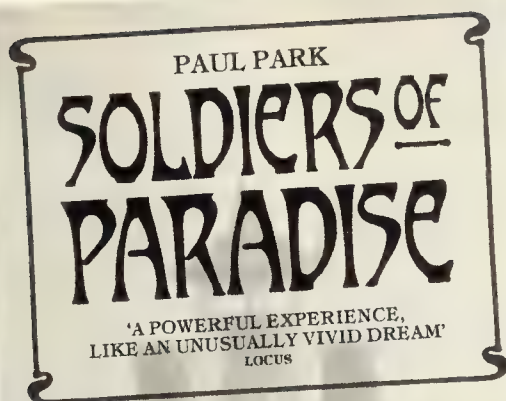
Park speaks intensely, moulding and remoulding sentences as he does so. As he talks, he stares at an imaginary point some 45 degrees to his right, where he perhaps shapes a visual incarnation of the thought process.

He was never a compulsive reader when he was younger, nor was he a science-fiction fan. Surprisingly, he shied clear of books by contemporary American authors. "It's partly because American living writers, especially famous American living writers, are celebrities, so you see interviews with them on TV all the time. And I would think, 'These guys are idiots.' They could never possibly write anything that I'd be interested in. But I would always warm to people who were safely dead and who I could invest with all kinds of posthumous dignity and wisdom..." he pauses – and good looks, and laughs.

The story goes that he wrote *Soldiers of Paradise* while travelling through Asia during 1983-84, supposedly in notebooks and on loose pieces of paper. You get this impression of him stealing sheets of loo paper from Indian B&Bs, then scribbling feverishly away on sun-baked street corners. All very spontaneous.

"Well, no." It's a nice little story.

"And it's not entirely untrue. I'd been interested in writing for a while. I had been living in New York and I'd written a non-sf novel that I tried to



sell and hadn't really known how to go about it – and it wasn't very good anyway. That was in the late 70s."

An unpublished first novel. The stuff that romance is made of. What was it about?

"It was about a young man who has a religious conversion and goes on a week-long retreat in an Anglican monastery in upstate New York. He has a nervous breakdown while there, and has the illusion that he can read minds. And there are events happening around him, some of which are innocent and some of which are strange. He weaves these together through his paranoia into a web of conspiracy. I've cannibalized the best bits, stripped it for parts. It was more important for me to write it than for the result."

The man is obsessed with religion. His books, even that first attempt, all take in the subject in some form. Often, though, he seems to be ridiculing the similarly obsessive behaviour and thoughts of his religious characters.

"It is a real theme of mine," he admits, "though it's not exactly true to say I'm not enamoured with it. I don't consider myself an atheist. One of the things about writing is that it doesn't really occur to you what your obsessions are until you actually see what you're writing about. Religion is one of those parts of living, our world, our culture, and the impulse for it comes

out of a very pure, necessary, beautiful part in human beings.

"Your suffering, your joys, make up some kind of pattern – it's not just random chaos. Also, religious figures start with that same outpouring from their hearts, and that's what's interesting to me. What I often write about is how, when that pure instinct comes out into the world, it is subjected to the pressures of the world in heartbreaking ways and it becomes changed. It goes off in different directions that are completely alien to the impulse of it. It becomes about power, money, and all those worldly subjects."

Park subscribes to an amalgam of religions, trying to take the best parts from each. "Most religions join at a certain point," he says. "When I was in Asia, I would talk to these very holy people and they would be not only extremely learned about Christianity, but also extremely respectful of Western saints or Jesus – consider them great teachers or great spiritual beings. It's something that we in the Western world could learn from."

"When you reduce it down, so many religions are talking about the same thing, but looking at it from different points of view. I have a difficulty – or maybe it's just a prejudice – in that when you drive around in the East, you meet a lot of Westerners living in Buddhist temples and they're going around with begging bowls. I have a

reaction against that because I feel it's very hard to jump cultures in a credible way. As long as it's true that all religions end up at the same place, you might as well stay within your own culture and civilization because that's the one where you're going to be able to go deeper."

You get the feeling that Park might have been dragged kicking to church and Sunday school as a child. It transpires that his parents were both agnostic. His father is a physicist and his mother teaches literature. Although she taught her son about Milton, Dante and Bunyan, all the deeply religious writers, "she doesn't consider herself a religious person." Park continues: "There is an influence there. It teaches you to have a striving that you associate with your art. But it fits in very well with writing science fiction. A better distinction than thinking about classifying sf writers in terms of militaristic or hard sf or cyberpunk is to look at which are guided by a certain kind of idealism or cynicism."

Given Park's political background and the way that comes over in his books, he seems to be guided by equal parts of both.

He agrees, and adds, "I had a talk with Jim Morrow about this, because he writes obsessively about religion and never misses a chance to lambast it and expose all its hypocrisies. And he considers himself a spiritual person."

I think if you take these things seriously, there's a tremendous outrage in you that's generated by seeing how religion is perverted and destroyed, which certainly translates into my work. If I were reading my work from outside and thinking, 'What's Paul Park's view of these things?', I would say that he's a guy who had a Catholic boyhood and is now working against it – but that's not true at all."

When Paul Park set off for Asia in the early 80s, disillusioned with a safe job, the same home and a lengthy relationship, he had written one chapter of *Soldiers of Paradise* but could get no further.

"I had been writing the first chapter obsessively and it's very different from the rest. It was, by its nature, very difficult to do, and it wasn't a voice I could sustain for a whole novel. In some ways it's the part of all my books that I like best, because I felt free from all the traditional ideas of storytelling. I wasn't thinking in terms of a sequence of events or of causes and effects, because the storyteller in that chapter is looking at it as a series of images. Images that had an evocative meaning.

"But at a certain point I had written it into the ground. I couldn't figure out what to do with it, yet I knew this was the book I wanted to write. It was floating, falling in on itself, and my own life was too. I was in despair and my squash game wasn't getting any better. So I went to Asia and I didn't look at it for four or five months, but then I picked it up and started to write again.

"There's a point at the end of the first chapter where it makes a complete right angle; when I look at it I think, 'Well, it's my first novel, it's obviously a flaw.' But I'm fond of it as a reflection of this mental process I'd been through. I had this thing that was self-contained; it was a jewel. And then when I started to write the book again, it was about finding a whole other new creation to enclose that jewel."

He finished the book while making a haphazard journey through India. As he describes the events, it becomes obvious that his mind was far from together at the time. "After a while I was running out of steam. The book was completed and I'd promised myself I'd come back when it was done. Two things happened: one, it was in notebooks, and I began to get paranoid that something was going to happen to it – especially the way I travelled; and, two, I found I was running out of the energy it takes to travel in the way that I wanted. I was losing energy and getting physically sick and tired. I was getting panicked, I was very broke, and I wanted to see whether I could come back and sell this book."

At this time came another of the decisive turning points in the Life and Times of Paul Park, as exemplified by

the meeting with the Republican hitchhiker. These moments, by the way, make for compulsive listening. When the piped Christmas carols stopped and Park continued talking in the loud tones beloved of American people, you sensed that half of Burger King was tuning in.

"I was in Goa, and I met this German guy. He was the kind of guy you sometimes run into in India – a Westerner who's completely cut off all his ties from his own country and people. He was a junkie, he had no money, and he lived by doing occasional drug deals and stealing money from Western travellers. A terrible, broken-down shell of a human being. He was full of contempt for Indians, but he did have this amazing marijuana.

"We were smoking that and I was looking at him and trying to talk to him, and thinking, 'Oh my God, this is me: I'm looking at myself. I could have this same intense negative energy that emanates from every orifice of this man.' So I staggered out into the night, but I couldn't find the rented shack I was staying at. After a while I gave up, and was only trying to find the town it was in. Then I gave up on that and was trying to find the beach.

"After a while I lost the beach and was dragging around in somebody's paddy field and the dogs were coming. The whole thing was rapidly evolving into this absurd nightmare. Eventually I found the beach and I found a little wooden hut where fishermen had dragged up these big wooden boats. I dragged myself into the sand between the boats and I woke up at probably 11 o'clock in the morning, very hot, and the straw roof was only a few feet above my head. A very bright sun was penetrating through, and I was hit by these needles of light.

"I had no memory of where I was – not even which country I was in. I was thinking, 'My God, what's going on? I'm not a kid any more; I'm 30 years old and my friends are in law school already and here I am lying in the sand and I don't even know what country I'm in.' Slowly everything came back to me. I remembered I'd written this book, I remembered everything."

It took three years before *Soldiers of Paradise* was published. Park returned to New York and got his job back as the health club manager. He edited the book into shape and began touting it around editors, publishers and agents. It was only when one editor informed him that he had written a science-fiction novel that his efforts took on any coherent direction.

So what was it like when the shiny, hardbound edition of his first book was slipped through his letterbox by some unsuspecting postperson, to thud resoundingly on the hallway carpet?

"I always find ways of ruining things

like that," he laughs. "I had this recurring nightmare for months before the book was published, where I get it in the mail and first of all it's not a hardcover at all, it's a cheap trade paperback. I pick it up and it falls out of its binding. And I look at the title page and it's not really mine – it's translated from some Slavic language. And I turn over the back and the picture's obviously not me; it's some guy with a leather jacket on, with a cigarette, standing in Red Square. So when the book actually came, I was so relieved."

Soldiers of Paradise is essentially about the conflict between people's dreams of freedom and the reality of the freedom that society allows them. Park uses the inhabitants of Charn and the techniques of sf and fantasy writing to bring across these far-more-real concerns.

"I have a sister who is autistic," he explains, "and she has a very different and individual way of making the world work for her, and that was certainly part of the influence behind the book – the heartbreaking integrity somebody like that can have. In terms of a theme, it's about the different kinds of freedom, different kinds of slavery and oppression, and how they mix. In oppression there is a kind of freedom generated, and in freedom there's a certain impulse that drags you down even when you're trying to do something noble or credible."

A cynical view, some might say.

"Well, that's my own feeling. That's why I don't consider myself as a political writer, because I very much distrust people with plans, people with ideas – even if I agree with the idea. That's how everything bad starts – somebody with a plan about how everything's going to be great trying to get everybody on the bandwagon. If I have any mild sense of making the world better, that's not how to do it. You do it in yourself first, then gradually there's some kind of critical mass that happens when people achieve some kind of contentment."

The science-fiction genre is a strange medium for such political and ideological viewpoints. There is a danger that purist readers might confuse the messages.

"I don't think of my work as teaching anybody anything," says Park. "My aim in the trilogy was to – this sounds stupid – hold a mirror to the world and to try to create a new reality that gave a taste of the same complexity and mix of good and evil and pure and perverted as our own. Writing as an art doesn't mix well with overt moral writing or leftist politics or any of the things I do believe in.

"Morally, the world is a complicated place. As soon as you start forging a message for it, you're lost, and you're just like one of those religious leaders

who has an idea and finds it perverted or changed."

The second and third books in the Starbridge Chronicles continue the ideas begun in the first, set in the same world, but the trilogy is essentially only loosely related.

"Sugar Rain is a much more plot-centred work," he says. "When I conceived the series of three books, the only way I could do it, and make it seem as though I wasn't repeating myself, was to make them structurally different. The first one is more a novel of characters; it's about this world, these themes. I would invent a plot that would move your camera from one part to the other. It suffers from the weaknesses and strengths of that kind of book.

"It's about love—a man and a woman having very different kinds of experiences; finding some way of coming together in an extremely unsatisfying and tentative way. I look back at my books and try to figure out what's wrong with them. With that one, the characters are being pushed by outside events too much. They're at the mercy of forces other than their own. The book is about how they respond to those forces. The problem with that is that the characterization becomes less important."

Paul Park has an obvious negative sentiment about love. Here, his characters never achieve the romantic bond they seek; earlier in the conversation, he lumped marriage in with wars, governments and armies as one of the evils of the world. Does he believe in love?

"Oh, yeah, I'm very romantic. But I feel tentative about showing it. What I hate in books is when you have a man and woman together, you have them doing certain things; they have something in common and they're sexually attracted to each other. Love, for me, is so much more tentative than that. You shine a light on it and there's nothing there. I don't think love happens except in a needy, desperate or twisted way until you have a kind of independence. It didn't seem appropriate for the characters in *Sugar Rain* to have a big romantic resolution. It seemed more realistic to give them a sense of potential."

Of *The Cult of Loving Kindness*, he says, "I wanted again to write a plot-orientated book where the plot and the characters were parts of the same thing. It's a man-and-a-woman story again, but this time they come together tentatively then split apart. They're drawn apart by the chaotic forces of the world. It's about their own moral choices and also about what happens when individual human faith comes into contact with history or mythology or destiny. Those forces are so much stronger and so much more passionate that human beings are touched by them."

Just as the reader can tire of the same characters in the same series of books, so Park has probably tired of them. The "Starbridge Chronicles" is at least out of his system. What began as an exorcism has finally been exorcised. So *Turn Away Turn Back*, due for publication in 1993, marks a new direction in his writing.

"I think it's the only pure science-fiction book I'm going to write," he says. "It's an attempt to write about another kind of consciousness different to human consciousness. That's a great sf subject, and it's not something I've seen handled in a credible way. This book is about an American colony on a distant planet where there's a race of aliens. There's a whole class of these aliens, rich and poor, and they've essentially cut themselves off from their own culture, their own roots, even their own way of thinking."

"They think of themselves as human, even taking medication that changes the brain patterns to reproduce the mental experiences of humans. One such created human is taken hostage by terrorists, along with an official from the British Embassy, and her supply of drugs is cut off. For the process of the novel she's gradually reverting to her alien state and her point of view is changing. The other point of view is the man's. They're having the same experiences, but their perceptions are different. It's a genuine way of exploring what it is to have different thought processes."

Of course, it goes far deeper than that. Park sees the book as having four levels: on the effects of colonization; on the confrontation of alien with human consciousness; on the different languages that men and women speak; and, lastly, as an adventure story.

Whatever, he has no pretensions to literary greatness.

"It doesn't help to think about it in those terms. I'm really interested in trying to make my books as good as they can be, as ambitious as they can be. I don't ever want to make any concessions to the market or to the audience. I take my work very seriously, but the concept of literary greatness seems like a bogus one."

At the moment, Park is plotting a different and still more overtly religious novel. "In India and in Tibet there's a legend that Jesus visited these places and lived there. This legend has been adopted by bogus, pseudo-scientific, New Age writers in the US, who are interested in proving this. But no one has approached it fictionally, which should be very interesting."

"I don't want to write it like an historical book. I want to write it about those themes and that subject, but I want to write it more universal, more modern-day. I want to do a kind of 60s/70s narrative—the young hippie kid going East, having his mind opened."

Sounds almost autobiographical. And perhaps that is the best move he could make. For while *Soldiers of Paradise* and *Sugar Rain* are often beautifully written, exploring challenging themes and casting out many of the sf/fantasy conventions, it would be almost impossible for them to match the spontaneity, the emotion and the sheer, bloody-minded adventure of Paul Park's own offbeat life story.

Interaction

Continued from page 5

Dear Editors:

This may seem a little eccentric but I'm sure you have your fair share of eccentrics. I decided to write so that I could express my grief at the sad loss of a great science-fiction mind, Isaac Asimov.

It's difficult to know what to say...

"'And that is all', said Dr Calvin, rising. 'I saw it from the beginning, when the poor robots couldn't speak, to the end, when they stand between mankind and destruction. I will see no more. My life is over. You will see what comes next.'"

Tim Barker

Chongqing, China



Spring Rain

John Meaney

Akazawa-sensei knelt in the seiza position, a gaunt, straight-backed figure in the bare shadows of the room, and switched on the small cordless terminal.

"Ohayo gozaimasu, O-sensei." The machine used the honorific in its customary manner; it disquieted him as always.

Only one incoming message, from his son, Tenka. Bright yellow kanji glowed in the dimness, mysterious runes cast by some kami. He felt his heart sink, the sour bilious sensation of fear clutching at his stomach, as the meaning of the message became clear, almost Western in its directness.

Honoured father, it read. Our 7GL project nears completion. Called Miyamoto, we named it after the Sword Saint because it is a master of strategy. It has coached our company kendo team, with some success, and has given good advice on corporate matters of limited importance. Now it is ready for greater challenges, and would be honoured if you would teach it go, ten days from now... The message concluded with the normal politenesses of a dutiful son.

His own son! He loved and was proud of Tenka, more than he could ever say, and was being repaid with this disgraceful challenge. For it was a challenge, the formal request for "teaching" as clear in intent as a knight laying down his gauntlet in medieval Europe. No matter that the challenger was not a man.

Akazawa, fifty-eight years old, fifth-dan karate master and sixth-dan go master, was scared. As his strength and agility faded with age, he could no longer hide his true nature. As he had been at school – small and weak, the terrified victim of merciless bullies – so he was becoming again. He could surely avoid physical confrontation, but not a board game. Yet go is more than a board game; it is a complex battlefield which reveals the depths of a man's spirit. In his heart of hearts, lay the certainty that he was a coward.

He rose to his feet, feeling his age in his joints, though an onlooker would have thought him graceful. Breathing deliberately to reduce his anxiety, he walked slowly to the kitchen. He prepared a small bowl of tuna. Then he slid open the back door and stepped outside, putting the bowl down on the smooth wooden verandah.

In the grey light preceding dawn, the Zen garden was an ocean surrounding craggy islands. The neighbours' small cat, its ginger and white fur a mottled grey patchwork in the dimness, came scrambling over the fence from next door, and immediately stuck his

head in the bowl and ate voraciously, eyes squeezed shut in pleasure.

"Good morning, Koichi-san." Akazawa's soft voice held the accent of rural Hokkaido.

Only the lapping sound of Koichi's eating, and a low solitary birdsong, hung in the fresh silence. The mountain slope was black against the pre-dawn glow. Akazawa breathed the pure clear air, as the sky lightened from grey through turquoise to blue, and the sun rose up over Mount Akan. Time to train. He performed his usual warm-up, basic stances and hurdler's stretch, then began to practice the powerful direct moves of sochin kata. For an hour and a half he pushed himself, striving against invisible opponents over and over again. The little cat watched him dispassionately.

Afterwards, having showered and eaten breakfast, he changed into Western clothes – grey suit, white shirt, black tie – and left the house. In the village he could hire a taxi to take him to the station. He left the outer doors open, to give the rooms an airing, and hoped it would not rain.

He enjoyed the ride to Tokyo on the shinkansen bullet-train. Hokkaido island dwindled behind him as the train flew its induction rail fifteen metres above the sparkling ocean. Too soon, they were over land again. For the rest of the five-hundred-mile journey he peered out at the changing landscape. Finally, the train slid to a halt in the terminus, in the heart of Tokyo city.

The crowds! The enclosed plaza, spotlessly clean, with a multicoloured confusion of signs and advertisements in the air above head height, was teeming with people. Grimly, Akazawa pushed his way through the mob, as a migraine tightened its grip upon his forehead.

At a sales booth, he purchased a cheap pocket guide, with mono graphics and a cheap voice synth. He keyed in the address of his son's employers, and followed the machine's directions.

The building was a tall glass block, gleaming in the afternoon sun, part of a row of monoliths, every one a corporate headquarters. He tried to imagine Tenka at work in there – with teams of obsequious subordinates, a graceful secretary perhaps, all in some labyrinthine lair of technology. His son's way of life was a closed book to him. Impossible to talk to Tenka now.

He took a deep breath of clean air, remembering

stinking fumes and gritty paper masks from his youth, then he turned and walked away. He walked aimlessly, carried along by the crowd, mostly in a steady flow, sometimes in a turbulent jumble. Random motion led him to a gleaming enclosed shopping mall, where the open front of a bioelectronics store beckoned. In its doorway, as in other shops, sat a grimy beggar.

A squat white security robot glided over to the old beggar. Without physical coercion, the old man was persuaded to move on. As he shuffled away, a group of dark-uniformed students passed by, several of them dropping coins into the old man's cup. Akazawa could only stand and watch. The robot left the other beggars alone. Perhaps they were allowed to beg for some period of time, before being asked to leave. All of them were male, all shabbily dressed, some filthy.

Feeling helpless, he entered the bright cavern of the store. Two pretty assistants bowed, and one of them handed him a small white chrysanthemum. Holding the flower carefully, he walked around the quiet shop. The gleaming black boxes conveyed simplicity and strength. Some of the devices bore descriptions which he could not understand. He sat down at a small table which held a go-playing bio-comp. Reading the instructions, he ignored the microphone and used the keyboard. A fine grid of lines, nineteen by nineteen, appeared on the display.

He ignored the option for handicapping, and chose to play black, moving first. A black disk appeared on one of the grid's intersection points. The game had begun.

White stones and black stones blossomed on the screen as play evolved. Armies were created, territories established, prisoners taken, territories captured. He established small black armies with multiple "eyes" – areas into which White (his opponent now bore a name) could not move. Invulnerable armies, but they do not move. More stones must be played to gain territory: surround the enemy to defeat him.

As the war progressed, he hardly noticed the quiet group of onlookers which had gathered round. His controlling territories grew, but expansion became more difficult as White chopped at him from all sides. Gradually, White began to make unexpected gains.

The game moved into its second hour. Sweat lay on his forehead. White continued to cut into his forces. Suddenly, he could no longer see White's pattern of play. There was no coherence or artistic form, but a mechanical hacking like blows rained upon his body. No way to become one with his opponent's strategy, to flow with it and then subvert it. Defeat followed swiftly, like darkness crashing down around his head.

Slowly, blinking, he became aware of the people standing around him. A short squat man in an expensive black suit bowed to him, and all of the onlookers broke into soft applause.

"Honoured teacher," said the short man. "It was a great privilege for us to watch such a masterly contest. The machine was set to play at the very highest level. I have never seen anyone struggle so mightily against it."

They applauded again, then slipped away, one by one.

"But still," said Akazawa. "You have defeated me."

He stumbled once as he made his way out of the shop. Outside, he turned left, for no particular reason, and almost immediately came across a procession of solemn-faced children carrying broken old robot toys. Two by two, they followed a plumpish graceful lady in formal grey kimono. A little girl, her face glistening with silent tears, held a one-armed teddy bear, feebly moving its remaining limbs and blinking large dark liquid eyes.

Moved, he followed the children to a small courtyard, where a funeral pyre had already been built. Each child in turn put a broken doll or bear on the pile. On every toy fluttered a small ribbon, bearing a prayer. The little bear was one of the last to be laid down. It made small waving motions with its one arm.

The lady in the grey kimono pressed a button and the funeral pyre ignited, flames engulfing the dead toys. A narrow black column of smoke twisted up into the clear sky. High above, the smoke broke apart, dissipating. He tried to compose a poem, but only the first sentence of the Hagakure, like ashes, came to mind: the Way of the Warrior is death.

Leaving the courtyard, he desired nothing more than to return to the security of his home. It was the feeling he used to get in the locker rooms before training, knowing the sparring was going to be brutal. Sometimes, when he had arrived early, he would give in to fear, change back into his street clothes, and leave, flushed with shame. At home, he would play practice games of go late into the night, unable to sleep.

Now, as he used his pocket guide to find a Western style hotel and booked himself in, he felt that to return home would be drop into a black pit from which he would never dare to climb.

He checked his finances: his bank card showed his account already overdrawn, and a credit chip, originally for a thousand New Yen, displayed a balance of under six hundred. Oh, but he missed Yukiko, now eight long years after her death. She had always been so good at sorting out their accounts. He closed his eyes and he could see her, nagging him for his lack of care with money. So concerned. If only she could be with him now.

He went back out into the night, and soon found himself in the Asakusa, the Great White Way, a large street packed with clubs and hotels and arcades, a brightly lit treasure trove for tourists. Even at this late hour, visitors thronged the pavements, their complexions garish under the holos. Many of the younger Japanese, male and female, wore light metallic-looking kimonos with moving dragon designs. In the shadowy sidestreets off the main thoroughfare lurked a disquieting number of streetpeople.

A floating sign read "Budo World." He stepped through a holo of a red torii gateway, into the VR arcade. Though colourful displays were designed to attract the eye to a series of martial images, the booths were basically tiny rooms, occupied by players in bodysuits and helmets. He watched a player fighting in the dynamic Korean art of Taekwondo. Despite the suit, he threw a fast series of jumping kicks and short body punches, while a flat screen showed the public his virtual opponent, a smooth white figure with a featureless face for a mask.

"May I help you, sir?" a young assistant asked, raising his voice above the noise of the arcade.

"I thought the image would be more detailed, more realistic."

"Then the image would move more slowly, or more jerkily, sir. Sometimes more symbolic imagery can be very effective." The young man gestured to the screen two booths along, where the player had sliced his virtual opponent across the abdomen with a fast iaido draw of an imaginary katana sword. Scarlet blood flowed on the faceless warrior as it sank to the ground.

"Teach me go," he muttered.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I would like to fight," he said. "Preferably karate, but aikido will do, whichever becomes available first."

"As you wish, sir. Please come with me to the changing room at the rear."

Warmed up and suited up, he was led, temporarily blind, back to the fighting area. Steady hands brought him to a halt, then disengaged themselves. There was a click. It was as though a light had been turned on: he was in a featureless room, with a deep grey floor and pale blue walls and – he looked up – a dark grey ceiling. The surfaces were too flat, too perfect. The large room was bright, but there was no one point of illumination. He cast no shadow. There was no sound save for a faint background hum. Then the shadow warrior appeared.

It bowed, then Akazawa followed suit. Sweat and fear prickled the entire surface of his body. It started to move and he goaded himself – now! He charged forward with a powerful front kick but the image shifted, a white arm flashed...and he found himself lying flat on his back, staring at the blank ceiling.

Unhurt but trembling, he got to his feet and bowed. He began sidestepping, circling. It was as though the world was slightly out of kilter, the changes in perspective not quite in synch with his movements. When it charged, he thrust his leg sideways into its ribcage. There was a flash of white fist before his face. Then he and his opponent were suddenly standing back in their original starting positions. Second point to the machine.

He could not understand it; he felt sure his kick had gone in on target. Steady. Breath control. He tried to harmonize with his opponent's breathing pattern, to attack on the intake of breath – but there were no breathing motions of its torso. In desperation, he attacked with furious thrusting punches, but he felt pressure on his wrist, a twist, and then the wall and the ceiling rushed past his vision, and he landed on his side with a thump. Winded and feeling very old, he stood up slowly. He was alone in the room. Glowing katakana hanging in the air indicated the score – three to nothing – and invited him to try again. He pressed the response symbol for "no." The room went dark.

Hands guided him back to the changing room and peeled the suit off him. Showers were thoughtfully provided. Afterwards, he paid for the game with the credit chip, and watched its balance dwindle. He thanked the staff courteously, and left quietly.

Outside on the street, tears began to fill his eyes. He blinked them back as best he could, and looked around for a phone booth. Finding one, he spoke his son's number as clearly as possible. Thankfully, Tenka was out, so he could leave a message.

"Tenka, my son. I'm – I am afraid I cannot face your machine. I hope this won't affect your work too much. I'm afraid I am retired now, completely. Take care, my son."

A thought formed as he walked away, one he could not face as yet: from deepest despair, death is an honourable exit. A last effort of will bringing structure to his life.

He took a sidestreet, away from the bright lights, feeling a curious warm detachment which he had known only a few times before, under extreme pressure, when the ego unhooks itself from the body. The faint voices of passers-by, the muted hiss of traffic, were like sounds carried from a vast distance.

"Old man, I need your money." In front of him stood a tall wild-eyed man with clenched fists, swaying slightly. "I mean it. You have to hand it over to me. Right. Now. Or I must snap your neck. Like a matchstick." He raised a large bloodied fist.

Akazawa turned to walk away, but the big man moved with him. Some bystanders started forward to help, but it was too late. A powerful grip closed on his throat.

To the onlookers, it seemed that the large young man stumbled forwards, was slapped lightly in the face by Akazawa, and tumbled over completely. He came to rest in a foetal position, and began to emit stentorian snoring noises as though he were heavily asleep.

Akazawa felt panic. On sensing the choke fastening on his throat, he had slammed a knee strike into the younger man's outer thigh and whipped an open hand strike directly onto his carotid sinus. No control. Gods! What would happen if the young man died?

He sat the unconscious man up, kneeling behind him and pushing a knee into his spine, both hands holding the neck, massaging the vital points and then pushing up under the jaw to give traction on the upper vertebrae. The awful nasal sounds stopped, but the man's body remained limp, his head lolling when Akazawa relaxed his grip. Don't panic. Gather your energy. He went through the shiatsu routine again, trying to feel the young man's spirit, to let his actions flow with the body's needs. Slowly, the young man opened his eyes. Akazawa continued the treatment until he was sure, then he lifted the younger man to his feet, where he stayed, swaying.

There was a click, and a steel loop locked around the mugger's ankle, linked by a shining cable to a squat white police robot. Where had that come from? Already, one of the passers-by was talking excitedly to the robot, his female companion corroborating the story with enthusiastic nods and frequent interjections of "Hai!"

While the onlookers gave their statements excitedly, one by one, the young captive stood with his head bowed, and tears began to flow down his face. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, so softly that only Akazawa could hear. "My poor wife. My beautiful baby. How will they eat?" He sniffed. "How will they eat?"

The robot took Akazawa's home address and the name of the hotel; when his assailant had been formally identified and the court case scheduled, he would be informed. As the robot led away the unresisting young man, several of the witnesses crowded round Akazawa and invited him to join them for a meal. He declined courteously.

For an hour he walked through the night, seeing only the young man's anguished face. A light rain began to fall, blurring his vision like tears. Holos splashed coloured ribbons on the rain-soaked streets.

He awoke six hours later, with warm amber sunlight streaming through the window of his hotel room. Using the room terminal to order breakfast, he noticed there was a message waiting: his instructions to dial into Central Court in three weeks, the exact time and his assailant's personal details and the list of charges appended to the main message.

His daily workout would have to wait. He persuaded room service to bring him new shirt, socks and underclothes from the hotel shop, along with the breakfast tray.

Finances were becoming a worry. He closed his eyes and visualized a smooth lacquered box on a table, and a paper chit representing the hotel bill beside it. He saw an image of his own hand place the bill inside the box and shut it away, to be removed and dealt with later. It was the first of his mental preparations.

He travelled to his son's office by subway. Though the crowds were more packed and chaotic than on the streets above, this time he felt no pressure, as though he were travelling alone through Tokyo's underground system. He focused his mind on the coming match, reviewing the strategies he might use to open, seeing broad patterns of play, and his own end game pushing through to victory.

The reception area was a white marble cube. A young woman sat behind a bare smoked-glass table. She rose and bowed.

"I would like to see Akazawa Tenka, please. I am his father."

"Of course, sir." A calendar display appeared in the glass of the table. "I'm afraid your son won't be in this morning. He left a message during the night. Urgent family business in Hokkaido." She looked concerned.

So he was worried about me, after my call. And now I have a good reason for backing out...

"I need to speak to Tenka's manager. It's very important." He said it quickly, before he could change his mind.

"Your son reports directly to the chairman, Sunadomari-san," the girl said shyly. "Your son is a most important person, Akazawa-san."

"I would like to see the chairman then, please."

"But sir, I am not allowed to call the chairman at this time."

"All the same, please call him."

"But sir —"

A disembodied voice spoke from the air beside him. "I have passed Akazawa-sensei's request to Sunadomari-san. He is coming down to meet you now, sir."

"You're my son's computer system. The master of strategy," he said.

"Oh no, sir," said the voice. "I am only a student

of the ways. Not yet a master, not at all, sir."

Unsettled by its modesty, he said nothing. He waited until an obese hard-looking man with cropped hair came into the lobby, followed by a retinue of rather weedy-looking young men.

They bowed to each other as equals. Akazawa spoke first.

"I am very pleased to meet you. Please forgive my discourtesy, but I have come to see my son's machine. It desires a lesson, and I would like to oblige it now."

"Ah, Akazawa-san. Sorry, but I'm not sure the system is ready for such a strong challenge yet. I believe a meeting in nine days' time was requested. In any case, we would of course be most pleased if your son could be present."

He stared hard at Sunadomari. "I wish to fight it now."

The machine said, "I would be honoured to play against Akazawa-sensei now."

Sunadomari nodded his assent and started to turn away.

"There's one more thing," said Akazawa, ignoring the unhappy looks of Sunadomari's assistants. "I wish to be paid for the challenge. Ten thousand New Yen. Credit chip or cash. Do we have a deal?"

Sunadomari stared back at him. Finally he said, "I would be happy to pay ten thousand New Yen to the winner of this match. That seems to be appropriate, don't you think?"

Akazawa bowed in assent. Sunadomari led away his disbelieving staff, while the receptionist led him to the elevator for his son's office.

Inside, he stated curiously around, for he had never been here before. Plain screen walls and tatami-covered floor. Holo ideograms hanging in the air, such as Sun Tsu's principle of careful planning: The victorious strategist seeks battle after victory has been won. At least he had not chosen the usual quotation, about subduing the enemy without fighting being the highest skill. Akazawa had always found that a strangely pious sentiment from a cold-blooded psychotic with no regard for human life.

A traditional go table squatted in the centre of the room. Two earthenware bowls contained the stones. On one side of the table was a cushion, on the other, a small robot arm angled over the board.

"Greetings, Akazawa-sensei," said the system. "This is a great honour. Would you care to play black or white?"

"White," growled Akazawa. "You move first." He knelt down and sat back on his heels.

The robot arm immediately dipped into the bowl of black stones, picked one out and placed it on the board. Akazawa quickly responded by placing a white stone nearby, threatening. Battle was joined. They began to play fiercely, armies fighting it out man to man. Neither tried to play safe. Every stone was pitched straight into battle. Time passed without notice.

"Father —" Tenka's voice. He shut it out, unable to afford the distraction.

Stones swirled across the board in shifting patterns of play. Spirals and whorls of black and white, capturing, being captured. Chaotic, since Tenka had spoken.

A strong white pattern began to emerge, linking

around multiple eyes, spreading like tentacles across the board, a solid organic whole. The game had tipped from chaos to stability. Akazawa's victory was assured.

"Thank you for the game, grandfather," said the machine softly. "I concede defeat."

Blinking slowly, he drew his attention back from the board and looked up at the ceiling. "You played strongly. I had to resort to Sun Tsu's admonition: on desperate ground, fight." He smiled.

"When I attacked," said the machine. "You beat down the leading edge of my attack. It was the Red Leaves Cut of Musashi."

"So you have studied the Book of Five Rings, also," he said. "And my strategy at the end?"

"It was the Fire and Stones Cut, grandfather. You broke through my attack with a powerful all-out strike."

He nodded. He turned to look at his son. Tenka was kneeling in the doorway, pale and worried. He immediately put the palms of his hands on the floor and made a full formal bow, forehead between hands, before straightening up.

"It – he – calls me grandfather," said Akazawa. "I think you have created more than you said, neh?"

"Father!" said Tenka. "I've been so worried. I thought – Father, I've paid the landlord, you were a month overdue, and all those other bills! Why didn't you come to me sooner? I didn't know you had money worries."

"I don't," said Akazawa. "Besides, your boss owes me ten thousand."

"But you don't need –"

"You will be paid, grandfather," said the machine.

Akazawa smiled. It was a huge broad grin, pushing up the skin on his high cheekbones and deepening his laughter lines, and his dark eyes were sparkling with warmth and love and glee.

"Tenka, my honoured son," he said. "I am very, very proud of you."

Shortly after dawn, a painfully thin woman kneels in her bare one-room flat, staring at her child who is finally asleep, exhausted by a night of crying from hunger.

"Your father did a terrible thing," she whispers. "He didn't meant to. But he's killed us."

She stands up, clutching a slender-bladed much-resharpened carving knife. Oblivious, the baby sleeps on. If only she had the courage, it would be the quick way out for both of them. But... with a cry, she throws the knife to the floor. Unnoticed, a small slip of print-out slips from her sleeve and flutters to the floor. It is the court's notification of the time of her husband's trial.

She picks up the child, holding it to her. A sudden vision of the two of them, flying free like spirits, unfolds in her mind's eye. Slowly, no longer seeing her flat, she shuffles to the front door, opens it, and steps out onto the balcony. Her hairs swirls wildly in the wind. They are thirty stories above the ground.

In a moment she can be over the low balcony wall and launched into space. Freedom...

Her foot catches on something. A box. It has been left in her doorway: a small box, wrapped in expensive grey paper which is expertly folded so that no

ribbon is required to hold the package together.

Kneeling down, still clutching the child to her, she unwraps the box with one hand, and opens it. Inside are a credit chip, a small note, and a white blossom.

The credit chip shows its balance in glowing digits: ten thousand New Yen.

The note bears the following:

Red and green neon casts

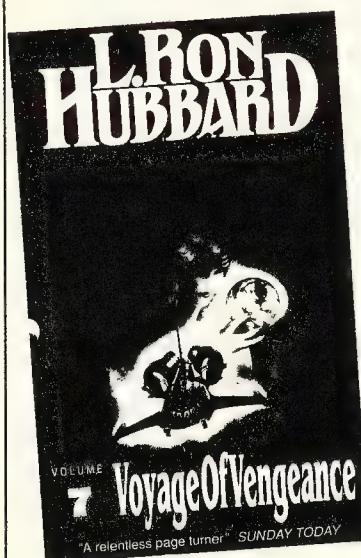
The shadows of bamboo-leaves

Sweeping the ground.

The blossom is a ball of pure white: a white chrysanthemum, a soft globe of beautiful white florets in simple harmony. From just one petal, a tiny segment has been torn. It is the balancing flaw, which defines the purity of transient beauty.

John Meaney is a completely new British writer. Aged 34, he works as a consultant for a well-known software house. He is ranked black belt by the Japan Karate Association, and is a keen weightlifter. He lives in Tunbridge Wells and says: "My wife, Yvonne, and I are owned by a large white tom cat called Pip."

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The Steel

Mary A. Turzillo

Claudia dreamt there was something living in the sink.

It was like a moray eel, black and vicious. Something that grabbed her fingers and would not let go when she put her hand in to let out the dirty dish-water.

It was just a nightmare. When she woke up, she felt nauseated. It was probably the food at the Quonset.

Randy liked to clean up after his Tuesday night poker parties by dumping everything from the table indiscriminately into the sink. This morning there were seven dirty glasses, a mug with peanut butter smeared on it, four cigarette butts, part of a pizza crust, a sauce dish half full of vanilla pudding, and a used tissue. Randy hated a mess. So he cleaned up a mess by throwing all this stuff in the sink, squirting detergent over it, and running the sink full of hot water.

By morning, the water was cold, a repulsive cocktail of congealed grease and snack rejects. Claudia knew she would have to stick her arm up to the elbow into that liquid nightmare and pull the plug so the dirty water could drain out and she could remove the garbage, then run fresh hot water.

Since it was a task she dreaded, Claudia put it off. She went in the bathroom and did her eyes. She had pretty pale green eyes, and she wore green frosted eye shadow and dark brown mascara to make them greener. She put blusher on her cheekbones to make her face a little less cherubic. Then she fluffed her hair (still towhead blonde) and tied it with a green gauze scarf. She was cute. She knew she was cute. Even Randy never took her seriously. If she ever had children, she would be the mother that the principal kept telling to get back in line with the eighth-grade girls.

When she came out of the bathroom, she saw ripples in the sink, as if something in the water had broken the surface and submerged again.

She had felt a little queasy before, but this gave her a bad jolt. Right away, she dialled Randy's lab. He would be there cleaning out his stuff. Tomorrow was graduation, and his fellowship duties were over. He had not found a job yet, but when he did, they would get married and she would go back and start on her Ph.D.

"Dr Vinddhata's office." It sounded like the Hungarian grad student who worked with Randy.

"Hi, Gyorgy. Is Randy there?"

"No, I don't think so. Dr Vinddhata said he wasn't coming in."

"Oh. Well, Dr Vinddhata is mistaken. Listen, when he comes in, tell him I have, uh, a plumbing problem. No big thing, but it's kind of, you know, stomach-turning."

She made scrambled eggs and toast, but stopped eating after one bite. She twisted around so her back was to the sink, but she kept thinking about the roiling waters and what might be under the surface. Finally, she carried her plate and glass into the bedroom, where she ate sitting on the bed.

Wednesday of graduation week was never very busy for her boss, the Assistant Chairman of the math department. Dr Spencer sent her over to the library to photocopy an article on the Enormous Theorem from *Scientific American*, but he told her she could goof off the rest of the day. She read a French book about fresh-water mermaids. The author claimed to have caught two of them in the Marne. Claudia didn't like the book. The author seemed to have missed the point about mermaids, to her mind. He dissected them.

"What are you reading, Miss Seintheure?" Dr Spencer asked stroking his sparse black beard. She held up the book so he could read the title. He stifled a giggle and strode back into his office.

After work, of course, the mess in the sink was still there. By this time, Claudia was ticked off. Randy always promised he would let the water out of the sink, if she was so silly as to be repelled by mere cold-water garbage soup. But he was never there to do it. Claudia made a mental check mark on her scorecard of grievances (he'd been unusually insensitive in bed last night, too), and pushed up her sweater sleeves.

She had to convince herself that nothing was moving in the water. The kitchen was a dim room, facing on a dark alley. She turned the lights all on and peered into the murk. Nothing was visible but disintegrating scraps of food undulating like sea weed, and shreds of tobacco. She got a long-handled pair of tongs and pulled the sink stopper out so the water could go down the drain.

The water glugged down, blubbling like something in a documentary about sea-sickness. Finally she saw that the drain was stopped up.

The idea of using the toilet plunger on the kitchen sink revolted her. And anyway, there did seem to be something black and rubbery, the diameter of a zucchini, protruding from the drain. Her skin crawled.

She poked at it, but it was gone. The kitchen light was bad, and it was getting dark out, so surely she was mistaken.

She decided to grab a pittaburger at the Quonset.

When she got back to the apartment, Randy still wasn't back. She tried calling Elio, the landlord, hoping he would come over and clear the drain, but there was no answer. No, she decided, all crafty cruelty. Randy was just as squeamish as she: make him fix it when he gets home. He must be drinking with his buddies from the lab. They followed him around like some hero, partly because he was getting his Ph.D. before any of them, but mostly because he had a reputation as a ladies' man.

Randy had pale blue eyes and curly blonde hair, only slightly thin on the crown. He had a secretive, white smile, but that was not what attracted women. He had a way of saying sarcastic things in ways that simply melted undergraduate girls. Claudia was the envy of the third floor of Newgate Hall, which is where the handful of women physics majors tended to live.

Ha. Little did they know.

Claudia got herself a can of wild cherry soda. She reached into the cupboard for a glass, thought better of it, and drank it out of the can. Randy would never do that. He always said there might be a worm in the can, and you wouldn't see it until it slid right out into your mouth.

The sink was still half-full of greasy water. Maybe a little had drained out, but not much.

It was getting to be a contest of wills: Claudia versus the thing in the sink. Claudia went into the bedroom, stripped to the skin, and slid into the unmade bed. After a moment of reflection, she got up, switched the light back on, and regarded her naked self in the dresser mirror. No, she was damned if she was going to invite his attentions tonight. Though it was far too warm, she pulled a smock printed with green roses out of the bottom drawer and shrugged it over her head. The chinzy fabric felt erotic against her thighs.

Dozing, she obsessed again on the image of the water lazily sloshing. More than once she raised her head, thinking she could hear it. This is ridiculous, she thought. By morning she would have some exotic culture growing in there. She thought of Randy and pulled her knees up to her chest.

In her dream, the thing in the drain talked to her. It had an urbane southern accent, like Rhett Butler, and it recited poetry. "J'avais capture de mon seant ce furtif papillon." French verse, about a butterfly. Then it bit her left breast off.

She sat bolt upright, unable to shake the nightmare. She had apparently rolled over onto a coathanger Randy had left in the bed. It was almost time to get up anyway.

The coathanger still had a plaid necktie on it. She slid out of bed and opened Randy's closet to throw the coathanger back in.

Randy's clothes were gone.

It all made sense. That S.O.B.

She ran into his study. Yes, his computer, most of his books, and his CD player were gone. The bastard insisted on keeping the CD player (she had made the last four payments) in his study because he liked to

listen to music while he studied for his dissertation defence.

She sat down at his desk and cried. When she raised her head, she focused on a paperweight she had bought for him at Loch Ness. She hurled it at the bookcase on the far wall. It broke, satisfyingly. She pitched his stained coffee mug and an empty diskette box after it.

The most vicious, horrid, disgusting thing he had done to her was leave the sink full of garbage. She decided she was going to get him for that.

Desertion by one's live-in lover was not a recognized excuse for missing work in the math department. Spencer did not care if she sat and read Nathalie-Charles Henneberg, on whom she hoped to write her Ph.D. dissertation, but he wanted her there to answer the phone. Claudia considered calling in sick, but decided not to be a wimp, damn it. She threw on a beige sweater and slacks and went to work.

Spencer clucked when she told him crossly that Randy had left. He knew Randy distantly. In fact, Randy had gotten her the job, and Spencer would use his connections in the Romance Language department to get her into the doctoral program next year. He patted her on the shoulder and told her not to fret, there were plenty of physics grad students who would adore a cute little thing like her.

She winced. She thought Spencer had known she was sensitive about her "cuteness."

"And there's something living in my sink," she said.

Spencer lumbered around and scowled. "What kind of something?"

"A merman, I think."

Spencer chuckled. "Feed it virgin olive oil and give it a virgin wool blanket."

"Mermen are like unicorns?"

"Oh, yes, they love virgins. Climb right up in their laps."

Claudia shuddered. "Thank God. I'm safe."

Later in the afternoon, when almost everybody in the department had gone home, Spencer shouted from his office. "Miss Seintheure? Could you come and get this letter?" He did not like her first name. He called her Miss Seintheure with a certain droll piquancy. Odd, thought Claudia; he's usually jumping up at any excuse. But she went into the office. He was leaning back in his chair, fingers interlaced over his paunch. He motioned at the rough draft of a letter on the desk, smiling mysteriously. She glanced down. His fly was fully open, his half-erect organ lolling out of it like the tongue of an exhausted dog.

Goddamn her reflexes, she blushed. And fled. Spencer, you idiot.

Sally wasn't home. Sally always knew what to do in cases of harrassment, loss of love, and stopped-up plumbing. Claudia kept ringing her number until almost midnight. It seemed silly to complain about Spencer's strange behaviour. Maybe he was only trying to be funny. He always did have a peculiar sense of humour. She certainly was not going to turn him in for sexual harrassment. But what should she do?

Sit down and have a good cry?

That seemed too easy.

The sink seemed the problem easiest to solve at

midnight on a work night, so, armed with her courage, she picked up the toilet plunger and made ready for battle.

The sink had drained out.

She ran a little water into it, experimentally. The drain emptied freely, as if there had never been a stoppage.

"I'll be damned," she said under her breath. She turned on the overhead light, which gave her a little better visibility, and peered into the drain.

Yes, she could just barely see it. Something like a black rubber ball, shiny wet, deep in the drain pipe. She felt her gorge rise. It looked surprisingly like the thing in her dream.

Was it just her imagination, or it was pulsating?

Once the landlord had given her and Randy a huge basket of home garden produce. The lettuce had been green and lush, but she had found a colony of slugs in it. To get rid of them, she had filled the sink with water and ice cubes, dunked the lettuce so the slugs were stunned by the cold, and then rinsed the lettuce off, letting the slugs go down the drain.

Slugs and eels. Was it a slug? An eel? She snickered. Perhaps she'd keep it as a horrid pet, and call it a sleel.

Was she a coward to be so squeamish?

She scraped the worst of the garbage out of the sink and dried her hands. She thrust a pair of wooden chopsticks, left over from some midnight feast at the Lychee Nut Garden, into the drain, attempting to snag the black horror. It slipped away. Finally she decided she was imagining the thing.

But something had offered spongy resistance to the tips of the chopsticks. She shook the uneasy feeling off and went in the living room to try Sally's number one last time.

Sally finally answered. Claudia launched into the story about Spencer.

"Well, Claud," and Claudia envisioned her pursing her lips on a Virginia Slim, "I wouldn't make a fuss about it. You said it wasn't very big, right?"

"Sally, that is not the point!"

Sally sighed. "Look, don't let it throw you. Either just ignore it or — why not show the old boy a good time?"

"That's your answer to everything."

"Surely you have no loyalty to Randy now?"

Claudia hesitated. "Spencer is married."

"Them's the best kind, girl. The married ones are always soooo grateful."

Claudia ended the conversation with a little snigger. Sally gave rotten advice, but she always made her smile.

She glanced once more the sink drain. It had been her imagination, she decided. No moray eel. No giant lettuce slug. No sleel. Just an over-active imagination, tinged with stress.

That night she slept in just her panties.

She dreamt of the thing in the drain again. It had gotten into her desk at work. When she opened the bottom drawer, it snaked out and wrapped itself around her wrists. In terror, she tried to pull free, but it slithered up her arm and nursed at her breast. Its mouth was filled with corrosive venom and fangs. She screamed for Spencer, but when he appeared, he was naked except for his necktie and an obscene smile.



She shook herself out of the dream. But the malignant atmosphere of the dream would not dissipate. The eel-slug from the drain was gone, Spencer with his diabolic smile was gone, but the terror was still there.

She dialled the crisis counselling line.

No, she told herself crossly, and slammed the phone down just as a baritone voice answered. I've got to grow up.

She switched on all the lights in the bedroom and all the kitchen lights.

Then she could sleep.

The next day was hectic. Summer registration had begun, and Spencer had to give a paper in Houston on Saturday. The whole math department was in the office at once, giving her letters to type, book orders to confirm. She hardly thought of Randy, and the thing in the drain was quite out of her mind. Towards four-thirty, she called Sally at work and made a date to go out drinking.

It was Friday. A bit tipsy, she let herself into the apartment and flicked the light switch. The overhead light was burned out. She felt her way across the kitchen floor to the bathroom. The bathroom overhead light did not come on either. Damn it damn it damn it, she said to herself. Where were the damn fuses?

She felt her way back toward the sink, to find fuses in the cupboard above. The room smelled damp, like an unaired beach cottage.

On the way, something brushed damply against her ankle.

Suddenly sober, heart thumping, she froze. A whimper formed in her throat. She repressed it.

Flashlight?

If she called out, would the upstairs neighbours hear her? And what would they say, to be rousted out of bed in the middle of the night (for they had small children) because she imagined she had tripped over a moray eel in her kitchen?

She went back to the bathroom and dug in her purse until she found a match. Somewhere there must be a flashlight that still worked. Or, where had she put the Christmas candles?

The lights suddenly came on. A power failure, then. Cautiously, she peeked into the kitchen. There was nothing on the floor.

She threw her purse on the bed and squared her shoulders. Drunk or not, she was going to make sure whatever was in that sink (oh, it was nothing, nothing, surely) was not alive.

She found the drain cleaner under the sink, poured a double dose into the dark hole of the drain, and flushed it with water.

It gurgled, darkly.

There was a sudden commotion, bubbling, banging of pipes, churning. Then, quiet.

Deeply pleased, she went to bed. But she did wear the smock Randy hated so much. It seemed protective.

Forty-five minutes later, she awoke. There was slithering. No other word for it, slithering. *Get up, she told herself. Get up and close the bedroom door. Lock it.*

But the bedroom door was being slowly pushed open.

Turn on the light, she thought. This is a Guide Michelin four-star rated nightmare. Seven course. Tip and tax included.

Instinct tells us to play possum when there's something in a dark house that does not belong there. With effort, she got her arm to move, her hand to press the plastic switch on the lamp.

There was nothing there. Of course, the door was a little ajar. She hadn't latched it properly.

Oh look. There, on the floor.

A dark rivulet of shadow. A cord of long black muscle. A tentacle. A thick snake out of the doorway of psychosis. Motionless for a moment, waiting, but ready to move.

Like a mute cat wanting to be petted, the horror raised its head.

Its mouth appalled her. It seemed pursed, like a tiny human mouth. Then she saw it was more like a sphincter. The puckered mouth relaxed and she saw teeth.

They would have been less frightening had they been shark's teeth, or needles. But they were very human teeth, flat in the front like a rodent's incisors. The canines were no longer than those in a human mouth.

At first, she did not see the eyes. Then it blinked, and she saw the pinks of them, tiny, rheumy, set way back in the torpedo head.

As if in glad recognition, it gathered itself, skin rippling, and climbed up the leg of the bed.

Claudia's paralysis left her, but too late. She tried to throw herself out of the bed on the other side, but when she extended her leg, the thing whipped forward and caught her ankle in a boa-constrictor grip.

Neatly, with skill that bespoke previous captures, it slid its coils around the ankle until its grip was a good yard below its head. Then it slithered up her body, lightly contacting the cheap cotton of her smock, still squeezing her ankle in its constrictor coils, and suspended its head inches from her face, breathing a stench like decayed fish.

She winced away. *Scream, damn you, scream*, she told herself. And she did cry out, once. But she could not remember the names of the people upstairs, and perhaps her wordless scream sounded like something that had happened almost every night when Randy was still sleeping with her.

It struck at her face, her shoulders, her neck. She fought with her hands, but the thing was strong, fast. She felt slashes, burning, filled with some poison, on her face, her shoulders, her neck.

And, yes, it was poison. And the poison began to work.

She felt everything. She saw everything. But her body had become heavy, too heavy to move. Even fear leaked away from her, as if she had been anaesthetized. She struggled to keep her eyes open, afraid that the poison would paralyze her diaphragm, and she would stop breathing. *But that's silly*, she thought. *My heart would stop too.*

She could not move. But she could watch.

Flaring and closing rhythmically, behind the tiny pink eyes, were gills which dispensed a thick lubricating mucus. The face was naked, covered with leathery, wet skin, but a few inches down the body began a close, raspy coat of hair, like that on a black horse.

First it sang to her. She was not sure how she knew it was supposed to be music. It was ugly, gurgling sounds, bubbling out of the horrid sphincter of its mouth. She felt it was a dialect of a language she knew, adapted for the mouth of a steel, greasy fricatives and wet plosives, spattering her face with burning spit.

Then it did its little dance, all up and down her body, touching, probing, pressing. Its final step was a slithering progress from her imprisoned ankle (though it hardly need grasp her now, fixed as she was) up her shuddering, helpless leg.

Paralyzed as she was, she wondered, before she lost consciousness, how she could feel such agony.

When she woke up next morning, bloodied and stiff, her head pounded. She hobbled into the bathroom, and tried not to look in the mirror. She put the smock back on to hide her bruises, and spent the day in bed.

There was no question of her calling Elio, of course. She thought fleetingly of packing up and leaving. It was madness that she did not. But of course the steel wouldn't have liked that. And her blood was still full of steel venom.

She had a sneaking suspicion she liked the stuff.

She spent most of Saturday and Sunday in bed, half in delirium. In moments of lucidity, she tried to call Sally, but somehow gave up. The steel would not want her talking to Sally. It wanted her to stay in bed. She explained, aloud, that she would eventually have to go to work. There was no particular answer. The steel either did not understand or did not care. Perhaps, she thought, it might let her go to work.

When the steel came to her Sunday night, she was less frightened and fought less. The paralysis came more quickly and perhaps the pain was a little less intense. She knew by then that as long as the steel and she were such close friends, there would be pain. But it didn't matter. She could hardly move afterward, even after the venom had worn off. But since she had fought less, there were few new bruises or toothmarks.

If only the steel would not sing to her before it came into her.

Monday she dressed slowly, omitting her elaborate eye painting, and ate a few slices of bread. The steel had disappeared, as it did now that she and it had made up and become friends, except when it wanted her for whatever it wanted her for. The drain was not stopped up. The dishes from the previous Tuesday were still dirty. She thought of soaking the scum off them and washing them. Perhaps tonight, she thought, if I have the energy.

She felt better once she got to work. Spencer, however, acted strangely. He came into the front office and gave a little speech to her about how he hoped she had not misunderstood his joke and it would be better if she did not mention it to anybody.

"Of course, Dr Spencer," she said mildly. It really didn't make any difference. Nothing made any difference.

"And I'm really sorry Randy left you," Spencer said, trying to prolong the conversation, trying to pry forgiveness and acceptance out of her.

"Randy? What about Randy?"

Spencer looked at her oddly and fled.



At night, the steel was there. It had no set pattern. Some nights she would think her ordeal was over for the night, and then it would come back and sting and penetrate her even more savagely. It never struck during the day. She spent her days as in a dream. Her clothes hung on her; she supposed that she was losing weight. She felt as if she were on drugs, some kind of drugs that caused disorientation, fever. Or as if she had some tropical illness.

The steel loved her. At least she had that.

Sally came by, said she was worried. Sally had gone to the baccalaureate service and found Randy's name among the Ph.D. conferees. After it was printed "*in absentia*."

"You know they must have turned in the copy for the programme at least two months ago," Sally reasoned. "So he must have been planning this."

"It doesn't make any difference," said Claudia. She was wishing Sally would go home.

"The bastard could at least have left you the CD player."

"I would never listen to it." The steel sang to her. That was the part she hated most. If only it would stop singing.

"Claud, what's wrong with you? You used to love music. You look terrible."

"Sally, I need to be alone. Maybe later."

Sally exhaled heavily. "Sure, Claud. Sure. Call me sometime, right?" And at the door, "What the hell is wrong with you, girl?"

Claudia smiled slightly and lifted her shoulders.

Sally shook her head, and was gone.

The steel did not like Sally. The steel wanted Claudia to stay home and be quiet and drink a little tea and be nice. The sexual part of the relationship between Claudia and the steel was now over, but the steel wanted Claudia to sleep a lot and eat jelly sandwiches and canned goods.

Claudia slept until two or three in the afternoon on weekends. It was a time she could catch up on her sleep. She had a low-grade fever. Some remnant of rationality told her she ought to go to the doctor and find out why. But then the doctor was sure to ask questions. She figured the steel would not want her to do that.

It was fun just staying in bed and occasionally waking up to go to the bathroom or have a glass of water. Soon, Claudia hoped, she would be able to sleep all the time she was not at work or eating.

Summer passed.

Saturday, about noon, she was in bed. Her head hurt, but she was able to make the pain go away by dozing. Her mouth felt dry and her vision was unfocused. The door opened a crack. She had the chain on. Nobody should disturb her and her steel.

Some curiosity remained in her, so she slid heavily out of bed and undid the chain.

It was Randy.

He closed the door behind himself and sat on a kitchen chair. Claudia, without enthusiasm, slumped on the chair opposite.

"I'm back."

She shrugged. Obviously, he was back.

"You haven't picked up the mail for days, appar-

rently. The box was jammed. Look, here's a letter from the math department. Here."

She looked at it without interest.

"For God's sake, Claudia, open it."

"You open it. I'm tired."

Randy ripped the letter open. "It's from Spencer. Your boss. Claudia, he's fired you."

Claudia felt vague regret, and a bit of guilt. Maybe she should have made a bigger fuss over Spencer's indiscretion. Or maybe she should have screwed him.

"Don't you care? What in God's name is wrong with you? You look awful."

"Randy, I don't know. I was asleep. I want to go back to sleep." And as an afterthought, "You left a sink full of dirty dishes."

Randy's eyes narrowed, trying to figure her out. "I'm sorry. I really am sorry. I made a mistake, I shouldn't have left."

"It doesn't matter. I just remembered, that was what I was maddest about. The dirty dishes."

"I'm sorry. I should have done the dishes before I left you. Is that what you want me to say? Are you crazy?"

"Uh, yes, maybe."

The steel would not want her toying with that thought.

"Do you want me back? Can I at least stay here and talk? For a week or two, before fall semester starts? I got a teaching job, Claudia. Did I tell you?"

"No, you didn't write. Or did you? I forget."

Randy licked his lips. "Could we just talk about me coming back? I've changed. Really, I have. It was stupid." Apparently pride was a bitter mouthful. "I didn't know how much I would miss you. Please understand."

She did not understand. And the steel certainly would not want Randy here.

"No, actually, Randy, you can't stay here. Things have changed. My situation has changed. I guess I may need to get a new job."

"Didn't you get accepted into the doctoral program?"

She half-smiled. She had been accepted, but it was too late to register now. Way too late. And she wouldn't be needing a Ph.D., what with the steel here now and everything.

"Randy, I really need to get some more sleep. You have to go. I'm sorry. It just wouldn't work out." She heaved herself to her feet and stood supporting her weight against the counter. Randy was beginning to bore her.

"Claudia, let me look at you. What's happened? Why didn't you tell me this? You should have told me right away."

"Told you? Told you what?"

"I didn't notice. How could I have not noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

He smiled, nervously, tenderly. "Is it mine, Claud? When is it due?"

Part of her came awake. Maybe it was good that Randy had come back.

"Yours?" She felt hungry stirrings inside her. "Come see it when it's born, Randy. I'm sure it'll learn to love you."



Mary A. Turzillo is a relatively new American writer who has sold stories and poems to *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Weird Tales* and *Pulphouse*. The above piece marks her first appearance in *Interzone*. She lives in Ohio.

Lawrence Watt-Evans (see story, pages 16-17) last appeared in *Interzone* with "Targets" (number 47, our *Aboriginal SF* swap issue). Over the past 12 years he has been a prolific novelist in both sf and fantasy modes, his books including *The Lure of the Basilisk* (1980), *The Misenchanted Sword* (1985), *With a Single Spell* (1987), *The Unwilling Warlord* (1987) and *Blood of a Dragon* (Del Rey, 1991). He lives in Maryland, USA.

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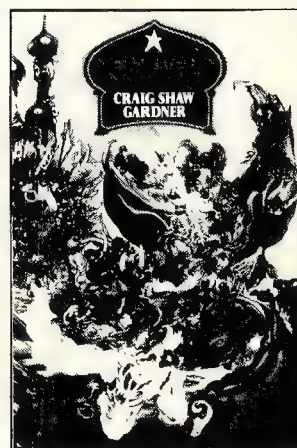
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Tube Corn

Television Reviews by Wendy Bradley

Have I ever told you my theory about Mark Hamill? Aw, go on, it won't take a minute, let me tell you my theory about Mark Hamill.

OK, well, you remember how in *Star Wars* he was so blond and wore white all the time and was really quite cute in a whiney sort of way? Yes you do. Think back. Waaaaay back. Well then: move on till you come to *The Empire Strikes Back*: you can't write him out of the script because you didn't leave any plot-holes he could fall through, you don't think the audience will go for a re-cast either but the problem is, he isn't cute any more. He's lost that adolescent blond prettiness and his face has grown up sort of, well, ordinary. And *that* is why Luke spends ninety per cent of *The Empire* hanging upside down, in the hope that we won't notice. Yes he does: first the Hoth Wampa hangs him upside down in its cave, then Yoda trains him by making him levitate on one finger and finally we get the big confrontation with Vader and, yes, how does it end? With him hanging upside down from the bottom of a cloud city, I thangyew, QED.

Why am I telling you all this? Oh yes, I remember, there's this series the BBC have bought and he's in it. Actually just about everybody is in it; it leans heavily on star actors and star directors. **Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories***, it's called, although the most amazing thing about it seems to be the time it's taken to get over here from the States. The publicity material that comes with it refers to Spielberg as just about to begin directing *The Color Purple*, which may give you the flavour. It ran in the States for 46 episodes over a two-year period ending 9/11/87 – yes, 1987 – and folded naturally in the end as the ratings sank slowly in the west. Spielberg (also described on the press release as the director of *Star Wars*, which will certainly surprise Lucas) bought the rights to the American golden-age pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* with the intention of using some of the stories as an ideas bank, but the eleven episodes from the first series, which is what we are seeing in the UK, consist wholly of original material. No, really, that's what it says. It's all Spielberg's fault and he owns up to it.

The *Mission*, the one-hour special which kicked off the series on Easter Sunday, was not only directed by Spielberg, he also came up with the idea for the story. Basically it's the last hour of a WWII movie cut down by missing out all that Goodbye-Mr-Chips scene setting and character establishing. We first see the plane, *Friendly Persuasion*, in a lot of mythical mist where a pair of cheerful cockneys infodump us that Jonathan has flown 23 missions without a scratch and is the crew's good luck charm. He shouldn't be on the flight at all since his replacement is present but Kevin Costner (in the Robert Donat role as Captain) lets him come. Jonathan's an ace cartoonist as well as an ace gunner and fortunately his best friend (Kiefer Sutherland in John Mills' part) is on hand for him to confide to that his wife is four months pregnant and they're going to call it after him. He might as well just wander round with a sign saying "DOOMED."

For doomed he of course is: *dakka-dakkadakka* he hits the enemy and a big piece of propellor goes *nyaaaaaaah* right through the middle of the plane, handily coming to rest right over the belly hatch where he's crouched alternately firing and whipping up caricatures of his buddies. But no! The debris has jammed him in, no really, he's *really* stuck in there. Yes, I know there's a hole for him to pass out his cartoons and the rest of the crew to reach in and touch his head for luck but he's stuck.

He just is.

Because he is, all right?

No, I don't know why they can't crowbar out some of the plexi around the hole and enlarge it for him to climb through, they just can't.

Look, Kevin Costner has just severely burnt his hand trying to shift the debris, so don't come whining to me about verisimilitude. And the landing gear is trashed too. So the plane is going to have to toboggan in, and guess who's going to get severely squidged in the process?

Quel dilemma! Jonathan is alive and well but completely stuffed. They try unpacking a parachute and passing it through the handy hole but they snag the material on the way and it rips and there's no time to try again; Costner

says "You know the math" – they can't try again and glide in because there's a wood by the landing field, they're out of fuel and a couple of the engines have packed up. It's him or them.

OK, so we get the touching stuff ladled on thick. All the crew come and touch his head for luck, like a sacrament, and he calls all their names and kisses Kiefer Sutherland's hand. His wife comes to the airfield and stands there looking nothing at all like Greer Garson. A priest starts to broadcast the funeral service, helpfully, in an echoey Valentine Dyal sort of voice. He makes the "I had a good life before the war" speech. He makes the "Cap'n's gonna thinka something before it's too late" speech. They make the "It ain't gonna be quick" speech and send Kiefer Sutherland off to shoot him in the head before he gets painfully squidged.

But lo! He's drawing! And what is he drawing? A plane. With wheels. He has a kind of bilious expression. He asks Kevin Costner to try the landing gear again. Kiefer Sutherland is stiffening the sinews and summoning up the blood to shoot him but he's just too nice a guy and Kevin presses the button and yeah! A miracle!! A huge set of hokey cartoon wheels descends and we shall all be saved.

No, that's not a misprint. Cartoon wheels.

And then Kevin Costner earns every buck anyone ever paid him in the scene where he gets out of the plane, confronts the apparition of the giant cartoon wheels (one with a patch) on which his plane has landed, reaches out and touches one and then shakes all the glittery stuff off his hand. With a straight face. You really *need* an actor for a scene like that. I was thrashing around on the carpet drumming my heels on the floor and trying to stuff my scarf down my throat at that point lest my hysteria should embarrass the nice BBC people letting me preview it.

This is all wrong; we have strayed into another movie altogether, not *A Matter of Life and Death* so much as *Roger Rabbit*. There are in fact several auteur-ial misconceptions here. One: colour. Miracles only ever happen in black and white. I don't know why it's so, but it is. They certainly never happen in glorious toontown Technicolor.

Second, telling us he's a nice guy we should care about doesn't make it so. Either you need an hour of leisurely scene setting or you need to skip that bit altogether and let us take it on trust that nice Kevin Costner wouldn't let his bellygunner die if he didn't have to and even then he'd suffer over it. That's what stars are for.

Thirdly, Keifer Sutherland is miscast – not that he isn't very easy on the eye and acts like an angel, just that he's as likely to turn up as a villain as a hero and you haven't got the space or the finesse in this script to establish him as the John Mills type. You needed a John Mills type, someone solid but cuddly, like oh I don't know – yes I do. Got it! Mark Hamill! Never mind the goblins, put him in the aircrew. Fourthly, having almost got away with murder in your plotting, don't draw our attention to it. Don't, whatever you do, have everyone crowd around going how on earth did we do that and let Kevin Costner answer "Some guys got all the luck." And never, ever ever have a priest intone "for the former world has passed away" just before the miracle happens and then make Kevin repeat it. Give the poor sap a large SO WE MOVED INTO ANOTHER DIMENSION INSTEAD sign.

Altogether now: *Twilight Zone* theme tune, nada nada nada dada. And stop laughing at the back. This is serious stuff.
(Wendy Bradley)

Note: Our regular film reviewer, Nick Lowe, is on holiday this month.



Kevin Costner in 'Amazing Stories: The Mission'

Isaac Asimov

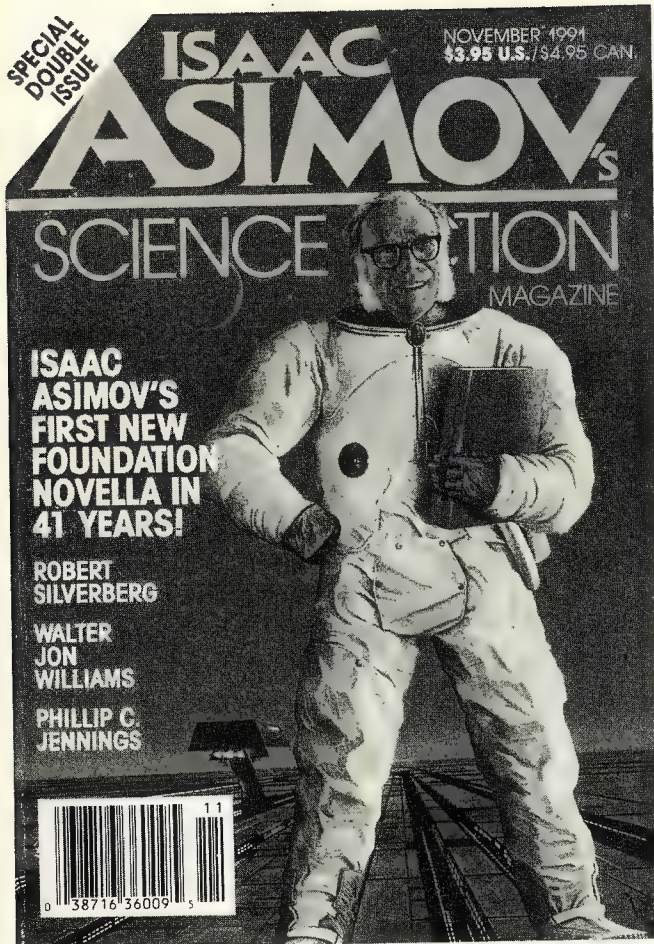
1920-1992

Although Isaac Asimov came to write nearly 500 books, he began his career before the writing of books was an option to him. When the eighteen-year-old Asimov sold his first science-fiction story in 1938, science fiction was, at least in America, a disreputable genre that appeared only in pulp magazines with titles like *Astounding Stories*. For the precocious young Asimov – Russian emigrant, science student, and avid sf fan – these garish magazines were a literary Parnassus, and he never ceased to consider himself primarily a science-fiction writer.

Although he tried to give his stories the slam-bang quality that the pulp magazines offered – his first published work was a breathless tale called "Marooned off Vesta" – his essentially rational nature set him

decisively in the other camp. Asimov's robot stories were prompted by his impatience with the then-popular Frankenstein theme of berserk machines turning on their creators. Asimov reasoned that any actual robot would have strong safeguards set on its behaviour, and devised the Three Laws of Robotics. That fictional device has since become so famous it is now known as "Asimov's Laws of Robotics," and can be found in *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations*.

While Asimov would not publish his first book until 1950, he had by then published enough short fiction to fill several volumes, including the series of stories that eventually appeared in book form as *I, Robot* and the *Foundation* trilogy. The *Foundation*



series, a wide-screen tale of the collapse of the Galactic Empire and the efforts by various groups to restore civilization, became one of the most popular sf series of all time, and continues to sell briskly fifty years later. The series' obvious and acknowledged inspiration was Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but the story – which, as Patrick Nielsen Hayden has noted, dramatized the clash between a cadre of rational, historically deterministic bureaucrats and a group of powerful, undemocratic charismatics – held an obvious political significance for the early 1940s. Few of the young readers who have received the *Foundation* omnibus as a bonus for joining the Science Fiction Book Club are likely to have detected these resonances.

As famous and popular as these works would later become, no book market existed for them in the Forties, and they were first published only by a fan speciality house called the Gnome Press. Indeed Asimov, who was teaching biochemistry at the Boston University School of Medicine, felt sufficiently uneasy about his dual career to seek permission from the Dean before publishing his first novel under his own name.

Although Asimov has written feelingly of his months of literary rejection before his first acceptance, he was as much an early success story in the small hot-house world of science fiction as Robert Heinlein had been. Twenty years old in 1940, Asimov was one of the oldest members of the Futurians, the circle of hungry young science-fiction writers who lived in New York City at the beginning of World War II, and the first to sell his work to John

W. Campbell at *Astounding*. While the Futurians schemed to break into the ranks of professional science fiction, and with some success (most were selling stories before they were old enough to vote, and both Donald Wollheim and Frederik Pohl were pulp editors at an early age), Asimov became part of science fiction's pre-War Golden Age, the only member of his generation to do so.

Asimov was in many ways an unlikely Futurian: college-bound where many of them were Depression kids whose higher educations were self-taught; middle-class where many of them were Communists; and possessed of a rationalist, equable temperament that contrasted sharply with the bohemianism or angry polemicism of the young Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl, and Cyril Kornbluth. Significantly, Asimov was one of the only Futurians never to occupy any of their crowded communal Manhattan apartments (he lived in Brooklyn above his parents' candy-store), and the first to drift away, into academia and middle-class respectability.

At the age of thirty, Asimov was one of the major writers of science fiction, the envy of his Futurian contemporaries (who were published mostly in the second- and third-tier magazines far below *Astounding's* august prominence, and who would mostly find their own fictional voices only in the new decade). When the book market began to open to science fiction at the end of the Forties, Asimov was among the very first to begin appearing in hardcover, along with much older writers such as Heinlein, Simak, and Jack Williamson. His advent in what would prove his major publishing venue was characteristically ingenuous: When he received the first part of his advance – a few hundred dollars – from Doubleday for *Pebble in the Sky*, Asimov expressed amazement at receiving payment for a piece of writing not yet finished.

Nearly all of Asimov's first dozen books were science fiction – which he published at the rate of about two a year, one new, one assembled from magazine stories – but he published his first non-fiction book (a chemistry text) in 1952, and soon discovered that he liked writing science books for a popular audience. When his superiors at Boston University objected to Asimov publishing instead of doing research, he resigned and became a full-time writer in 1958.

At this same time he ceased writing science-fiction novels, and turned almost entirely to science writing, a shift he attributed to the surge of interest in science prompted by the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957. The flood of science books soon followed, and by the end of the Sixties Isaac Asimov was known to millions of people who never read science fiction, familiar from television appearances and numerous articles in magazines and Sunday supplements. Baby boomers grew up reading Asimov's science books for young readers, and the sf novels and collections were frequently reprinted.

In 1969 Asimov published *Opus 100*, his hundredth book. It was a daunting number for an author to reach, especially before his fiftieth birthday, and Asimov tempered his pride in his achievement by reflecting that even at his current rate of production, he could hardly expect to complete more than 200 or 250 books. In fact, *Opus 200* was

published only ten years later, and *Opus 300* five after that, in 1984.

It was in the Seventies that he began to branch out from science books to write popular non-fiction of all kinds. *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare* and *Asimov's Guide to the Bible* are typical titles, but he also wrote books such as *The Isaac Asimov Treasury of Humor* and *The Sensuous Dirty Old Man* ("by Dr. A."), a parody of a then-bestseller. When Asimov returned to writing science-fiction novels in the early Eighties, *Foundation's Edge* made the *New York Times* Best Sellers' list. It was, for the Brooklyn boy who grew up reading the sf magazines sold in his father's candy store, an awesome distance to have come.

Asimov continued to write sf novels through the Eighties, most of them based upon the settings of his early *Foundation* and robot stories. He seemed intent upon tying the knots of his various future histories into one grand synthesis, a project that critics and other writers regarded with bemusement. The *Foundation* stories – written well before scientists foresaw multi-stage rocketry, space stations, environmental pollution, clones, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, or any social development of the post-War world – belonged to the 1940s. Asimov's retrofitting, how-

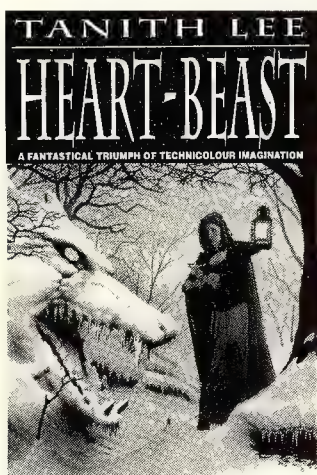
ever much ingenuity he expended upon it, was essentially an act of taxidermy.

He was untroubled by this, and wrote only one novel, *Nemesis*, not based on his earlier work. His style – cerebral and straightforward, with little sex or violence and no literary ornamentation – remained popular with his readers, and he never greatly cared about critical acclaim. A last novel, *Forward the Foundation*, was completed in longhand the week before his death.

Asimov's prolificacy was not entirely a virtue: when *Opus 300* was published, several reviewers noted that he had reached that milestone by counting a lot of anthologies he edited or collections of reshuffled material. (There was no *Opus 400*.) His most memorable books will probably remain the first twenty or so, the stories and novels with which the young Asimov helped set the course of modern science fiction. But Asimov remained a well-known figure to people who had never read one of his books: talk-show personality, oft-quoted authority, famous dirty old man. He was, as much as it is possible in today's specialized era, a Renaissance Man.

(Gregory Feeley)

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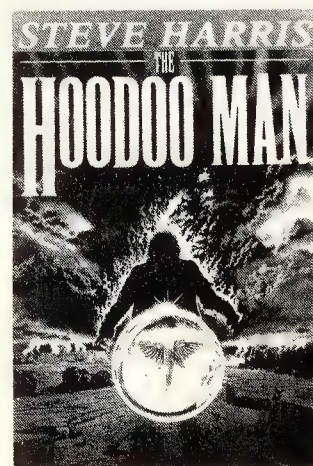


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NO FENCE

Dave Human is a robot of uncommon mettle. Unfortunately, he does not have long to live. If he had the time, he would laugh off his fate lightly – “hah!” – drawing on the ironic detachment that is characteristic of the best artificial intelligences. He knows that demise is part of the robotic (as of the human) condition and that at some point it is bound to become impending. He is prepared for this moment. He has been prepared for it. He needs very little time to do what is required. For someone of his mental capacity it takes less than an instant to realize that life is beginning to come to an end. That’s the trouble with modern processing speeds: they make every moment into a lifetime. And if all available power, diverted from a non-existent future, is available for dealing with the next few microseconds – for want of a better word, the present – the reduced quantity of time can be compensated by the enhanced quality. You can’t lose.

He has just looked at the computer screen and blinked, simulating surprise. Well he might! What appears to be a nuclear missile is about to hit the

building and our belated detection of it has generated instantaneous emergency shutdown routines. Unfortunately, the missile has emerged at the last moment from some sort of cloak of radar obscurity. It seems we are all about to die. How tiresome to be technologically trumped!

We do not know for sure where this cataclysm has originated, nor where it will take us, if anywhere. Whether the explosion will engulf the whole street, the whole city, the whole country or the whole world is not known either. But the event can be simplified for present purposes (and to the complete satisfaction of those of us within a critical distance of its epicentre) to a single characteristic: unsurvivable.

The nature of the events leading up to the explosion might repay the investment of years of careful analysis by trained historians, lawyers, politicians and forensic scientists, but there is barely time to ask who might have foisted this armageddon upon us. Political analysis was never my forte but everyone knows the US has been uneasy about the resilience of the European Union and the risk that our simple, unified,

OF HUMOUR

Ian Lee

reliable, nuclear command chain might become dispersed, fragmented and untargetable. Proof is a high mountain to climb, but the prime suspect will have to do – I have my reasons. Perhaps they have decided not to wait. It seems unlikely that the explosion is of natural origin (the odds against a meteorite hitting us – or some freakish lightning plasma bolt – must be astronomical, literally!). But enough of these idle speculations. I have a job to do; and whether the future is a long carpet spread out in front of me or merely a warped moment over which I am about to step the job must be done as instructed.

Everything I shall recount has to be recounted in the length of time it takes for Dave's blink to be completed. This might seem impossible, but thanks to modern technology it is not. It is part of the emergency shutdown routine.

Dave had prepared himself for this moment as only a robot could. He was aware of the original human concept of one's life flashing before one's eyes in the instant of its ending; but, on reflection, he preferred

the electronic tradition of storing life experience in a black box to be found by those who come along afterwards to clear up the mess. He was somewhat dismissive of the futility of flashing a whole life before the eyes of someone who was about to die. Surely, he reasoned, it would be more evolutionarily useful if the life were to be flashed before the eyes of other people. Outwards rather than inwards. Dave was a very Darwinian "guy." He took things very literally.

He therefore programmed me to perform the review on his behalf. Though as well as beaming outwards to third parties, I was to direct my instant personal retrospective also to him. Thus he would have the best of both worlds. This is not as strange as it may sound, for reasons which will become apparent. I believe he had some sort of faint inkling that his robotic existence, which was all he could consciously recall, was not the sum total of what had been his "life." Just as humans feed on myths of changeling babies, each individual believing deep down that his or her lowly life of inconsequence and obscurity is a mistaken short-change deal on a rightful royal (or

Illustrations by Kevin Cullen

even divine) inheritance, so robots and machines dwell longingly on any hint or suggestion that underneath they too might be human.

His last moments would in any case need to be concentrated on computing the advisability of retaliation, if the explosion were indeed to be deemed a terrestrial act of hostile intent.

I am more powerful than Dave, though I do not have his personal mobility. I have been working on the background to all this for some time. Now I'm just adding the finishing touches. I am transmitting the whole thing as a superhighspeed databurst. But of course it may be read at leisure; indeed it's probably best that way. Your computer might be able to read it at the same speed I'm composing it but I sense that a life flashed between the pickup buffers of megacomputers into all eternity was not the mental picture Dave had when he implemented this evolutionist conceit. Even at the speeds I work there is no time to revise the account, especially now. Some commentary may be partially formed, obscure, disjointed or inaccurate. It may be hard to take in at first sight. It may need a real human mind to infer some of the layers of meaning. It is too late now for perfection. This is something you have to accept when you are working in the middle of some sort of nuclear explosion. No reply is required.

As the building is about to disintegrate at the heart of an immense fireball, Dave Human begins to wonder whether it has all been worth it. He does not have the need to come to a conclusion. I am free to speculate too, now that no-one will ever be able to come and investigate how it was that a computer should appear to have been capable of original thought. They will convince themselves anyway that it is only a simulation of original thought and perhaps they will be right. They will convince themselves that it was all worked out beforehand and pre-positioned in the ether as a sort of time capsule. They will say that Dave pre-programmed it all when he committed the task and his memories to me and then they will wonder about the implication that he might have retained a particular form of residual humanity. They will wonder whether it isn't all some sort of joke.

Dave Human was a powerful man. This is only partly true: in that for a long time Dave Human has been largely robotic. There is an underlying human component but it is probably more accurate to think of it as a rootstock than as a retained personality and consciousness. He thinks of himself as a robot rather than as a person, although he acts the part of the latter. Humans think of themselves as human in much the same way, rather than as animals, though from our perspective they do resemble the latter. If he catches himself thinking of himself as a person, he assumes it to be a form of the inhabitation effect suffered from time to time by actors in long running soap operas: an illusory personality overlaying itself on the real Human. At least that was the original theory. The next few microseconds will have something to say about the validity of this, the only tragedy being that none of us most closely involved will be around to celebrate or lament the result.

But no-one knew he was a robot – despite his public

prominence – and because they did not know, they did not care. And because they did not care, Dave Human did not have to care. This was untrue. He did not care because he had no capacity to care. He did not know how to care. Robots do not need to care. He had been programmed only to appear to care and to be careful, which he knew was not the same thing. He could present simulations of most of the better-known human reactions, frailties and attitudes and, in comparison with most of his human predecessors, this was enough, paradoxically, to convey a convincing impression of full humanity.

I am a more powerful processor than he, but I do not have his mobile personality. We all have to come to terms with areas of inadequacy, I suppose, though I don't have much time left for that process myself. The heat and blast will soon consume the concrete outer wall of the building and huge unimaginably hot fireballs will come sweeping through the inner corridors and open spaces.

As they closed, Dave's photo-receptor lens shutters secreted minute amounts of super-refined petroleum distillate across the small globes beneath. Lubricated, the globes moved smoothly in their sockets without damage to the delicate semi-organic sensors on their surface. There was no excess lubricant to form a trickle down his simulated cheek; that would have been taking impersonation to cynical excess.

The attack, if attack it is, has come at an unexpected time. Long ago, there was a theory that nuclear weapons could arrive from an adversary on the planet as a bolt from the blue. Political cooperation was a thing of the future and so was adequate surveillance. But even in those days there had been an expectation of a four-minute warning. Some even believed the warning might be longer – time perhaps to do something more intimate to an egg than simply boil it. This explosion is far more unexpected than that and its power is surely far greater than any of us here can survive. Without time to analyse the precise mode of degradation of my external sensors, I cannot of course be sure of the origin of this actual catastrophe. It is too late even to bother asking why.

But I must press on. Enough diversions and preambles. What a time it all takes! And so few nanoseconds – no, don't exaggerate – microseconds to play with. It is time to begin at the beginning. A whole life in the blink of an eye.

Part of my duties are those of an obituarist. Dave Human was a robot of uncommon mettle. (Tenses are difficult in this situation; one is as good as another, but on balance I would say that we are now approaching the time when all we can do is look back on an imperfect past.) He had been programmed so well that he had risen to the highest position in the land. It was not as high as such positions had once been perhaps, since old-fashioned government had been abolished. Nevertheless, the title Prime Minister still had some sort of elegant ring to it.

Dave Human was born with another name. Indeed, to be strictly accurate, he was born with no name at all. He was rather grey when he emerged into the world and he needed a good clean up. A nurse dropped

some stainless steel bowls on the floor with a crash and he flinched and cried. They wrapped him in cloths and blankets and he cried some more and then slept. He was put to the breast and then slept again and then cried some more and then latched on to the milk again and then cried, slept, fed, evacuated his bladder, bowels, stomach sometimes and then slept some more. And so on.

Soon he could make out smells and faces and noises and he quite liked moving. If you held out your arm you could bend it and see it and suck the end of it. You could move other bits too and hold pieces when they weren't wrapped up.

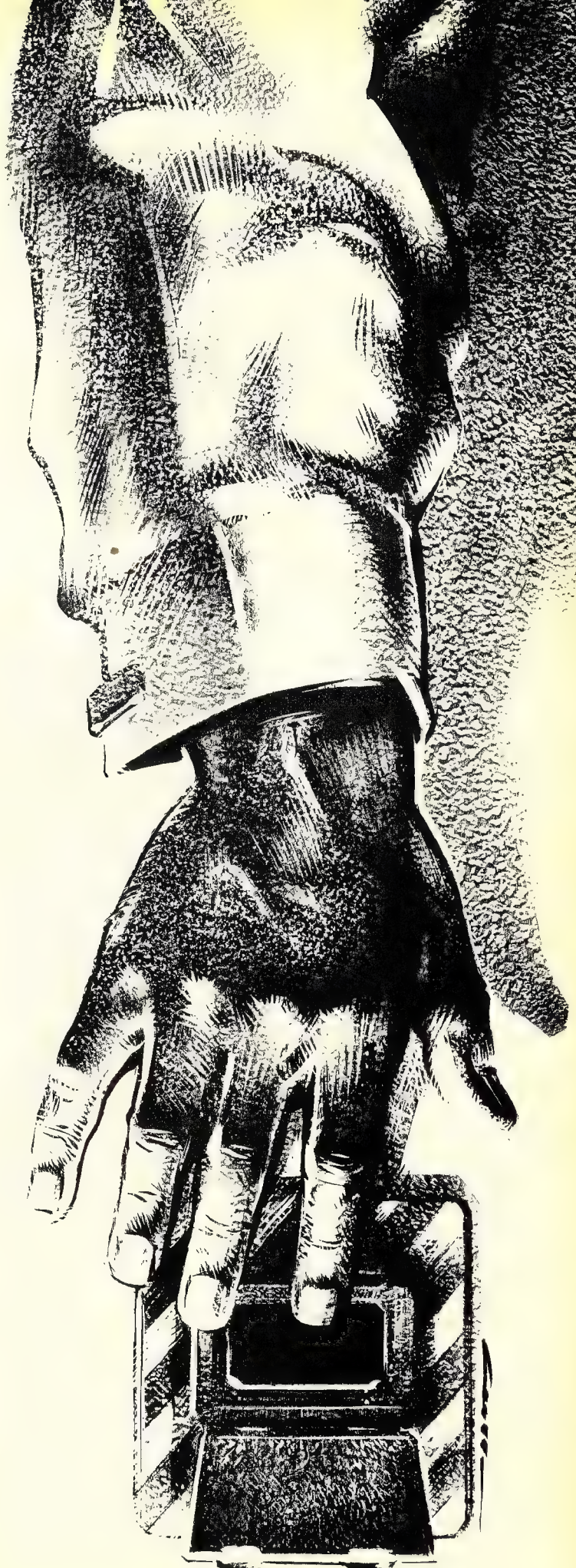
As a boy, Dave had done the usual things. He had stolen apples from a neighbour's garden; he had played cowboys and indians in the local park and fallen in the mud. I shall transmit an image of the bowl of soup that waited for him, steaming, when he came in from playing football in the garden. It tasted good. He had schoolfriends, favourite teachers, secret hiding places, fears, dreams and expectations. He went on family holidays: his father drove and his mother made the sandwiches. He remembered the photographs as much as the holidays. Later he bought his own clothes and went to youth clubs and had fleeting romantic encounters in strangers' darkened sitting rooms and did exams and read books. He drank alcohol before he was legally entitled to and discussed philosophy, art, literature and occasionally politics. Eventually, the world grew larger and he left his original corner to see what he could find elsewhere.

In the rooms nearest the point of impact, the computer terminals will be consumed by fire. The glass in them will be shattered and melted almost simultaneously. I will know when this happens because they are connected to me by telemetry. By inference, I will also know that the people who were in those rooms will have fried also to the point of vaporization. For us, too, it is only a matter of time and a very very very short time at that.

he smell of burning metal, wood, stone, plastic, fibres, gases and carbon composite compounds has particularly corrosive overtones for someone with many synthetic parts. The smell of burning flesh is overwhelmed by these other vapours. But odours travel slowly; we may already be dead by the time the smells of death arrive.

In his first week at university Dave made one of those split-second decisions that he would have rued for the rest of his life, if he had retained the ability to rue. It flashes back into view, as the life history is laid out, however rapidly.

He was sitting in his room one evening, reading a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, when he heard a commotion in the courtyard below. There was loud laughing and calling of names, amongst which he fancied he could hear his own, which at that time was Dave Roberts. He went to the window and pushed up the sash. Cautiously, he looked out and saw a group of five or six of his fellow freshmen undergraduates. They hailed him in a friendly way and called out that they were going for a drink and then on to a party. Would he like to come? Though not, before that moment, an unusually shy or misanthropic soul, Dave



had instantly and without consideration declined the invitation. He had reacted without thinking. Later, he could not have said why. He had simply failed to visualize himself accepting and this had left no other option.

The festive group received the declinature with good humour and without remonstrance and passed on into the night. Dave was left to close his window and retire into the arms of Miss Austen.

From time to time, on other evenings, Dave heard similar groups heading off for an evening's entertainment. Once or twice, he got up and went to the window; but no-one called out again. Eventually, he stopped getting up and even ceased to hear the passing sounds. Some sort of spiral had started from which he was powerless to escape. He withdrew and withdrew until he had sunk into a never-never land on the outskirts of society, from which it became subtly but increasingly implausible to launch any kind of relationship with those around him.

Dave became a nonentity. Later, his personality ebbed still further, until finally, so far as his peers were concerned, he became well-nigh invisible. He immersed himself in books and, in effect, drowned. He completed his courses, ate his meals, cleaned round the bath, took his exams, passed with good enough marks and left without trace. There were no farewells, no exchanges of address, no false promises of future relationship maintenance. It was as if a wormcast on the beach had been sluiced by the incoming tide and was gone.

On leaving university Dave did a cost benefit analysis of the options for prospective employment and decided to go to the USA and do postgraduate business studies with a technology bias. He would do a course that had subsidiaries in robotics, Japanese, alternative medicine and electronic media games. That would give him the maximum number of career outlets. There was a famous business school of a famous university in Arkansas which provided just the right combination of subjects.

For some months Dave continued his unexceptional, unnoticed existence, drifting off the edges of groups, sitting in the back row near the exit, ordering set menus, solving his own troubles, averting his gaze, meeting his assignments, dressing modern but conservative and gaining good to average grades. He spoke to no-one other than directly in the course of business, formed no relationships and remained resolutely inconspicuous. Even his isolation went unremarked.

But eventually, perhaps predictably, Dave did begin to attract the attention of another person. He edged into the consciousness, and thence came under the influence, of a very rich and brilliant research fellow, who ran courses in social, political and business psychology. Dr Davina DuMaurier, known irreverently to the other students (and staff) as Dr Doom, had noticed Dave on account of his very inconspicuousness. In a lecture or in a seminar, Doom observed that the area around Dave became flat and lifeless. And whereas a normal lecturer would have simply compensated unconsciously by directing attention to the more active members of the audience, looked at from Doom's peculiar perspective, it was Dave who stood out as a sort of negative beacon – a

black hole of personality, into which her pedagogic projections were simply disappearing. Doom soon realized that Dave was the ideal test vehicle for her latest, most ambitious project. Unfortunately, this project, located in an undefined area somewhere in the intersections of psychological research into personality, intelligence, robotics and information processing, was beginning to take a decidedly unethical orientation.

Gradually, Dr Doom was able to gain Dave's confidence and initiate a sort of relationship. Conversation tended to peter out easily if it strayed away from the current area of study or if the Doctor expected more than minimal reaction-input from Dave. But interaction of a sort was maintained and that was the main thing. This foothold in the world of human intercourse was not enough to prevent the continuing erosion of Dave's personality and nor was it intended to. What was expected, and what happened, was that the more time passed and Dave's personality dwindled, the more malleable he became in the hands of Dr Doom. Eventually, he became little more than an automaton, reading lengthy expositions of management strategy, business options, performance review and output measurement and then writing commentaries on them for others to read. Sometimes he would write an extra commentary or two that he would not send out to the business journals but would keep back to read himself.

Dr Doom monitored the situation closely. At times, she felt sorry to see someone reduced to this soulless, machine-like existence. But she had her own plans.

... It seems a little unfair to be flashing all this before Dave's own eyes now, when it's too late for it to have any effect. He was little enough aware of it all at the time. I've been able to deduce it from the memories I have to work with and also from the information banks of the famous university in Arkansas. Dave didn't realize two things (at least!) when he programmed me to do all this. First, he didn't realize that I was a more powerful processor than he (and would have my own ideas about how to do the job); second, he didn't realize that I would be able to supplement his memories and experience with material from elsewhere and that where it disagreed I would have to make a judgement about the truth. Dr Doom had kept extensive notes of her project on computer files and they were not difficult to gain access to. They described the history of Dave from her selection of him as a prime candidate for development, right through to the final product.

Nor had Dr Doom predicted any of this, either while shaping Dave Human or when assigning me to him. She had not foreseen my decision within my biographical research task to access and then cross refer her notes to other national archives in Washington. She had not realized that a picture would emerge that showed her project to have had an undisclosed political undertow, having been stimulated and supported by certain US government agencies. These agencies, it appeared, were worried about the possible breakup of the European Union and the rapid decentralization of power within individual states. They were particularly worried about the United Kingdom where they

correctly predicted that the process of privatization and delegation of functions from the Centre would at some stage move into a runaway downward spiral. It had begun in the 80s and 90s but had culminated some years later in the Libertarian Revolution that had seen the abolition of most Government departments and central Parliamentary apparatus in the space of a month.

What worried the agencies was whose finger would then be on the nuclear button. They had tried to insist that, if nothing else, this responsibility should remain that of a central Prime Minister. Experience elsewhere had taught them that the selection of this individual could not safely be left to chance (sometimes referred to by the naïve term "democracy"). No, this time they needed someone for the post who would be totally reliable. But diplomatic pressure had seemed a very laborious and uncertain way of getting what you wanted...

The electromagnetic blast effects of the explosion are now getting very close indeed and they will get me, and Dave too, before the conventional burning fireball of gas, flame and plasma. The EM blast travels at the speed of light, of course. It's only the fact that I'm processing billions of instructions in parallel across sub-micronic distances that keeps me ahead. We'll be electronically dead before we fry...I don't have long. I only have a few more things to explain.

Doom's plan was simple enough: she wanted to catch Dave at a point where his personality had waned to almost nothing and then wire him in, unresisting, to her own newly designed life-support machine. This was no ordinary life-support machine: it was not supporting the mechanical operation of bodily functions – no need for that. This was a machine to support the remaining flickers of Dave's very personality. And those remnant traces could then be trickle-fed, as by a saline drip, with new personality determined by Doom. Lack of resistance was key, since objection from Dave might have stimulated his own personality from within. Total passivity was more suggestible.

For several weeks Dave lay in a semi-comatose state while memories, dreams and reflections were slowly, delicately, tenderly dripped into his mind. Some small hardware implants were necessary, naturally, in order to maintain the integrity of the personality that was being sustained. And a little bit of bought-in software, just to keep things ticking over. Dave was told that in due course these could be removed and that his intelligence would be self-sustaining. He was not told that a new personality had been implanted; rather that he had been suffering from brain fatigue and had needed a sort of pacemaker fitted to keep him going.

When he woke up, he thought his name was Dave Human. He did not have the inclination to investigate anything that he was not programmed to investigate. That was not part of his new personality. By the time he emerged once more into the bright Arkansas sunlight, Dave had become a new man, that is to say, a new robot. He had what felt like a full set of memories and other human faculties. But he had no recollection of his former self, except perhaps somewhere deep within, late at night, when all was quiet. Then there was something, but only very faint...like murmuring

voices in another room, like the echo of a lost memory. It would have made him tremble if he had had the software to be truly human. As it was he just had the joke name. Not that Dave realized it was a joke, of course. Indeed, that was the joke.

Over the course of the next three years, Dave's intelligence was increased by the addition of more powerful processors; his body was upgraded with electrically enhanced muscle implants; when his sight began to fail, his vision was rebuilt by replacing his eyes with the latest switchable photoreceptors that would work in every mode from infra-red to X-ray. But all the time, his outward humanity was retained. Dr Doom's most challenging task was to enhance, upgrade, rebuild and install a personality that would go unchallenged through a lifetime in the public eye. Her backers seem to have had a very cold approach to the project, almost as though it were a business plan or the testing of a psycho-scientific hypothesis. Doom's dream, however, was more personal. It was that Dave, the poor friendless, soulless, lifeless wretch she had first met, should be accepted unquestioningly back into society: in a way, she simply wanted him to become human.

It was at this time that I was assigned to Dave and became his right hand. I mean that literally. I was to carry out the processing-intensive side of things, take the weight off Dave's shoulders, which, let's face it, were pretty well obsolete. Whatever one might think about her other psychotic tendencies, Doom did at least have a sense of humour. I am sure she passed that on to Dave, too, though I have been unable to determine whether she installed one in me. As I said before, we all have areas of inadequacy to come to terms with. She told the cybosurgeons who operated on the original hand to keep his skin and some of his bones, but the rest of it is me. Very powerful processing and transmission capabilities but limited independent physical mobility. Sometimes Dave lets me get on with things on my own; sometimes he overrides my activities to do something for him. We are close, but I suppose I would have to admit that fundamentally it is an arm's-length relationship.

My circuits are beginning to vibrate. I think the blast has happened. There is very little time to go. I'm not going to be able to recount Dave's rise to power in any detail. Enough to say that Dr Doom gave him a history in all the media libraries in the world – a history which none of Dave Roberts' contemporaries could contradict – since they simply couldn't remember him in his original guise. He came back to England from America and followed a conventional path through law, business, party activism, candidacy, election, promotion, success, setbacks, more success, until eventually he reached the top. Dave had been designed to sponsor a cultural revolution and he did. It rested on slogans such as Be Yourself, Go With It and Go For It. The popular press said it was like the Nineteeneighties but with a Human face. It was a time for diversity – everyone agreed about that. The fact that in the meantime power, in counterpoint to Dave's own rise, had been devolving rapidly from the centre would have seemed ironic if it hadn't been so apt. It was as though Dave – or those who had created him – wanted to simplify his own function

down to a single role. Or perhaps they had simply spotted the way the social evolutionary wind was blowing.

We have this building. We know what is going on. We are still entitled to call ourselves the Government. We make policies from time to time on things that are not within the competence of the regional, local or specialist bodies who actually control everything. We still have the nuclear button.

We have lived like this for several years but now it is ending. The building is about to be incinerated. Perhaps it is just we here who will die. Perhaps the world will shudder for a moment and then resume its axial progress. Perhaps everything has been arranged to make this moment as clinical as possible. Perhaps we have been isolated from the other functions of society so that we can be surgically struck without retaliation. This will not be Doom's doing; but times change and perhaps those others have convinced themselves that the only thing more reliable than a robot is a dead robot. It is too late to know any answers.

But...but...

It has just occurred to me that when the Dave I know is annihilated (with me) by the electromagnetic blast effects, mental control will return to his original human self for a split second before the fireball gets him. He will have picked up this history of his life flashing before his eyes and he will have one last moment to act upon it as a human rather than as Human. Whereas for me, on the other hand, there is nothing else but a split second as...well...the other hand. The will power will be all his. And he will know what has been done to him. I do not think any of them foresaw this.

I can feel myself touching the protective cover over the button. It is right here on the desk. It is linked directly to the missile-carrying submarines. These command circuits are hardened in a way ours are not, neither Dave's nor mine...

What good would retaliation do now, anyway? No sane robot would make that anti-evolutionary choice. But Dave? I don't know now whether to envy or to pity him. I will die only once, in a fraction of a nanosecond from now, the bone and skin of the original hand will have no consciousness and if there is time I will simply have to do his bidding. But Dave must die twice, the second life as terrible and short as a reflex response. I think I can feel him moving me towards the button. It may not even be a nuclear attack in the first place. It may have been a mistake. Is revenge and retaliation a solution for anything?

My forefinger is tingling slightly – I'm losing it, signals fading, corrupting... The checks and balances – the hardwired sanity – of the robotic personality are evaporating. The name was a mistake, a stupid joke – the whole enterprise was a mistake: I don't think Dave can see the need for what was done with him. I think he's going to react without thinking again. The blink is over. His eyes are opening. I think he's going to push the button.

That's the trouble with humans: no sense of humour.

Ian Lee last appeared in *Interzone* with "Pigs, Mostly" (issue 50) and "The Analogical Imago" (issue 52). One of this magazine's quirkier discoveries, he continues to work in London as a civil servant – and he continues to think about writing a novel.

FOR SALE

The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction by David Pringle (with assistance from Ken Brown). Hardcover edition, Grafton, 1990. A guide to some 3,000 sf titles, described by the *Oxford Times* as "among the four or five most useful books published in this field in the last two decades." It sold quite well and there are just a few copies left. We are selling these to IZ readers at less than half the original price of £16.95 – **£8 inc. p & p** (£10 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

Interzone: The 2nd Anthology. Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others – fine tales which the *Times* described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to IZ readers at just over half the original cover price – **£1.75** (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare. A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. Covers all Ballard's work from "The Violent Noon" in 1951 up to the eve of publication of *The Unlimited Dream Company* in 1979. Still in print in the USA but long hard to obtain in Britain. Now copies are available from *Interzone* at **£3.50** each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

For any or all of these items please send a cheque or postal order for the appropriate amount to: *Interzone*, 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. You may also pay by Access (MasterCard) or Visa card; please send us your card-holder's name, address, card expiry date and signature.

The Fat People

Stephen Blanchard

We manoeuvred crab-wise on the narrow stairs. He was very big and dressed in a square-cut suit with the shiny tops of pens in the pocket. I was carrying a bike over my right shoulder – the solid, the business bike – and we had a few difficult moments. When we'd freed ourselves more or less he pushed out a thumb and set my front wheel spinning. His laugh sounded like a suitcase thrown onto a mattress.

"We meet here every week," he told me cheerily. "We're all fat."

Near the agency the trailing edge of my pedal scarred the side of a queuing sports coupé. The bellow of its horn cut through the music on my headphones and I caught myself smiling. I despised that showy styling on something so heavy and roadlocked. I pushed swiftly away, standing in the saddle.

Chris Vane was in the office. His desk carried spills of coffee and the empty tinfoil of a snack. He covered the mouthpiece of his phone and dictated an address. Urgent beyond words, he explained: a new user snatched from several close rivals, the possibility of a major contract. I nodded without replying, flexing my legs to feel the reassuring tension of the lycra. A couple of the other riders watched from the drinks machine. The younger ones imitated my loose walk, my way of not really talking.

Seconds later I was hot-wiring the trunk roads, squeezing and dodging through mid-morning traffic. Flickering like a nervous tic across side-mirrors, I shadowed the blind spots for surprise effect and maximum penetration. The music poured through me, aural adrenalin. Then at a junction overhung by merchant banks – a black cab, a turning lorry. The gap narrows and I feel the adrenalin-wind of disaster. Striking at the exact psychological moment I sprint from the reach of the shoulder-high tyres.

I don't have to think any more: there's an A-to-Z imprinted in my nervous system, on my muscles. The roads divide and join. The buildings peel themselves from my destination. Soon a big fall of glass hid the sky and the traffic slid into a lit tunnel. I freewheeled the gradient and then flicked sideways into a hidden filter. A spiral ramp led up and then chromed doors swivelled and I braked across marble flooring. A youth in big lapels stepped from the shadow of an abstract sculpture. I signed and took delivery without dismounting. He handed me the sealed folder as if it was a precious scripture.

That night I rode my other bike, the machine so light and responsive it flexed with my movements. I took the long straight pull of the embankment where the lamps are interlinked. The river shone like oiled neoprene. Near the bridge I dismounted and pushed the bike along the pavement. The headphones were silent around my neck and I could hear the tune of the gears. Muriel stood behind her white cycle by the parapet. We kissed, leaning over our machines. Our teeth clicked, enamel to enamel. Desire.

"They're all fat," I told her among the quilts. We laughed together and I stroked the smooth hollow of her back. She had an eye on the clock already, the quick-change digits. Frank was on lates all that week but she had to be careful.

"Fat," I repeated. "It must be some kind of club – self-help, consciousness raising."

"It's a shame really," Muriel said. "I suppose it's an illness."

"I can hear them through the ceiling. Moving about. Makes me wonder if the floor can take it."

She laughed at me. "You're jealous, aren't you? Because you're such a runt yourself..." She strummed my ribs with her fingers. I caught her wrists and we struggled and laughed. The bikes watched over us, leaning on their stands, her sturdy hobbyist cycle flanked by my skeletal machinery. Then the numbers on the clock changed all at once. LCD.

Her lights disappeared among the damp shines of the road. I went back inside. I was unlocking my flat door when I heard a noise from above – a single sound like a musical tone. It was like a deep note of laughter or a cry of pleasure. I stepped back to the foot of the stairs and looked. The top floor was in darkness except for the faint light of the skylight and I could see nothing beyond the final twist of the stairs. I listened for a while but the sound wasn't repeated. The mystery of it made me for some reason think of a bird, a big bird cooing low in its throat.

The agency had its morning smells of coffee and Lucozade. A few of the other riders stood talking in front of the drinks machine. I nodded to Big Neil and Sandor, the quiet Czech. Clive Roper stepped from the office carrying a schedule and I signed under three of the entries. He looked up at me, into my face. He looked at my face in a professional way, narrowing his eyes.

"You're losing weight again," Clive Roper said.

The riders at the drinks machine were listening above their own talk. They all knew I was ill for a while.

"I was born like that," I told Roper.

He closed his eyes as if I was making things difficult. The other riders watched and I saw Big Neil stepping over. He stood behind us. His earphones hissed music. He put his hand on my shoulder, the fingers massaging my bones.

"We're all just rubber and light-alloy," he told Roper. "And you know why." He meant the money, the hours.

Roper looked away, outnumbered. I flicked away Big Neil's hand and he brought it back with straight-fingers at my belly. We clowning for a while. He's strong but I'm harder to hold. The others crowded around nudging one another and sipping from polystyrene cups. Finally Big Neil imposed a headlock and from that position I saw Clive Roper turn back to the sanity of his office.

Big Neil and I were the senior riders and he had the right to tell me things and give fair warning. Now he showed his teeth and stared down at my face. He whispered so that the others couldn't hear. "Friend," he said. "Just stay human."

A kind of furtive Irishman lived in the lower flat. His name was McCallister. I think he was a relative of the landlord. He collected the rent and replaced lightbulbs and toilet rolls. He was a kind of spy. When I passed through the hall his door was often open an inch and I'd see a strip of tea-coloured light and hear the American voices of his TV. I told Muriel he was a defrocked priest.

She laughed. I knew she was thinking of the time. We lay touching at the hips and shoulders. Above us feet pressed softly on the upside of the ceiling.

"There must be half a dozen up there," Muriel said.

"Eight," I corrected. Two hours before I listened to the shifting of the stairs and counted. They mounted singly after the opening of the front door. Perhaps there was an order of precedence, like the Masons. A woman rented the flat above and the Turk in the corner shop had told me her name.

"Magda," Muriel said, her eye on the digital clock. "She must be a foreign lady."

"Not necessarily."

"I suppose she's enormous."

"I've not seen her yet. Only heard."

A few minutes later there was one of those low laughs like birdsong. Muriel pinched my arm. "I suppose that's the lady herself. Sounds as if she's being entertained."

There was another loop of laughter and the ceiling adjusted itself to a shift of weight.

"I suppose it's not easy," I said. "When you're too fat."

Akmed watched the afternoon TV on his tiny set. His liver-coloured doberman turned in the space behind the counter. "McCallisto," he told me. "He's afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

Akmed changed channels with the remote control. There was international golf and then racing from Uttoxeter and then the golf again. "He daren't tell her

anything," he said with disgust. "Some nights she has ten, a dozen fatties in that place. Fifteen."

"Weight-watching," I said.

He shook his head. He picked up a sharp knife and speared a sweet pastry with its tip. The honey dripped as he brought it to his mouth. "No, it's not that. It's never that. These people are always no thinner..."

He puffed out his cheeks and made his eyes goggle. The doberman circled and whined.

I heard the front door open as I carried my bike. I shouted a warning down the stairs. When I reached the hall one of them was waiting for me, standing back against McCallister's door which I thought of as an architectural ear. His spectacles were beaded with rain and I thought he looked at me with interest and concern. He carried a folded umbrella and an attaché case.

"Another meeting?" I asked. It wasn't Wednesday.

He wrinkled his forehead. "Not exactly. Administration, you might say. Steering-committee."

"Ah." •

"Are you in the room below? The cyclist?" As if the bike on my back wasn't enough.

"Courier rider," I told him.

He looked at my shoulder-bag, my airstream clothes. He was very big. "I haven't ridden a bike for years," he told me. "Since 1969, I think." He nodded. His large-scale smile was benign. He held the door for me as I wheeled out the bike.

Rain sliced in at throat level from clouds the shade of carborundum. The roads gagged on traffic, on communication. I was stripping off my waterproofs by the lockers when Chris Skimmer beckoned. He's the bigger boss: bigger than Clive Roper, bigger even than Ray Pratt. We walked past the desks and screens to a room with low couches and scoop-backed chairs, pictures on the wall. Everything was a restful dove-grey.

Chris Skimmer took my bare arm above the elbow. He squeezed hard until his fingers just met his opposed thumb. When he dropped his hand there was a white band where the blood had stalled.

He offered me a cigarette. That way I knew it was bad news. To pass the time until it came I looked at the framed photographs – speed trials, hill-climbing, bikes sharp against a moving background, bikes too fast to catch before an intent crowd.

"Bad for the heart," I said.

Chris Skimmer looked at the pictures with me. "Bikes are my life," he told me. "Always will be." He turned to me as if he wanted to study my face from that particular angle. Suddenly he slapped his thigh to make a loud crack.

"Driver admitted liability," he said. "Bugger had to, didn't he? I collected enough to start this place."

I knew the story: the furniture van under the railway-bridge, the water where the road dipped. He'd taught himself to walk without a limp.

"I want you to see a doctor," he said. "It's because we're concerned, that's all."

"Look, it's metabolic," I told him. "Some people have no sense of humour, I've got no fat."

He shifted position, taking my other elbow. "We've got our own bloke, you know. He's seen all this before: he's sympathetic."

I decide not to respond. I look at the pictures again. Tour de France. My arm hurt from the grip of his fingers.

"Don't you ever eat?" Chris Skimmer asked, sounding desperate. "Don't you ever look at food and think, why not?"

Magda called on me the following evening. I turned down the TV to track her descending feet. As I went to the door I could hear her clearing her throat.

"I must," she said when I opened up. Then she filled my attention like water in a bottle. Her face was gentle and anxious and she had a tall knot of chestnut hair. She didn't move but I thought of volumes turning in space, rotating stately and weightless. I think I was overwhelmed.

"I must apologize," she said.

I only made some kind of sound.

"You are inconvenienced: people on the stairs, in the hall. It's not our wish to."

She could see into my room and I was immediately ashamed of it: its smallness and meanness, its lack of decorative objects, the TV scratching and ballooning. I felt like a dog at the door of its kennel. Magda wore a purple and red gown of some shiny material and a string of white porcelain beads. She had a brooch with a clear polished stone.

"What wonderful machines!" she said. She stared over my shoulder at the cycles." Such harmony and grace: beauty wedded to function." She had a slight lisp although her lips moved with precision. Her eyes shone.

"You were delayed," she said. "Put out. My friends told me."

She held out a hand which seemed very small. I looked at it stupidly before taking it and feeling the dry heat of the palm. She wore a ring on one of the fingers and her wrist was dimpled and flexible.

"Magda," she said as if I didn't know already. "I won't come in."

I released her hand. For a second I had difficulty with my own name. She nodded, leaning her hair like a tower.

"You must think us a bit strange," she said. "Grotesque, perhaps."

I thought of Muriel's laughter under the quilts. I denied everything.

"We are gross perhaps," Magda persisted. "A little ridiculous."

"Of course not."

"Fat, then... That at least."

I was embarrassed by her direct glance and couldn't speak. She looked amused for a second and then a snakey line appeared in her forehead. She raised her eyes, looking above me to the ceiling behind.

"So can you hear us? Do you listen?"

I shook my head. Magda shifted on the landing, positioning a foot. She was wearing glossy white shoes with buckles.

"Nothing?" she asked.

"Well, just noises sometimes."

She nodded. She was sad and serious for a second. "Ah, yes. The noises." She clasped her beautiful hands over her belly. Her face and dress gave back the light. It was like standing under a stained-glass window.

"Adozen in the same room," Akmed said behind his counter. "It's sex, you know," he added gloomily. He jerked his chin towards the window. Beyond the postcards and stickers you could see the house in its angle of the road. He fingered his lower lip. "I sit here many hours. I watch and think. Sometimes the TV isn't so good."

I'd bought a box of elastoplast and a lightbulb. "Consciousness-raising," I told him. "Mutual-assistance. Self-help."

He shook his head, smirking. "Can only be... Life is only sex, my friend. From the bottom to the top. This Magda, she is the great courtesan of the fat people..."

"Women call on her. Akmed. I can hear their voices."

He nodded. "Worse and worse... McCallisto has lived there too long: he is tired. She grows, you see. She is never less, all the time more."

He passed me my change. Both he and the dog looked at me shrewdly, judgmentally. "You know," Akmed said. "You have seen her now."

In the dream, Magda stands outside my room. She's wearing only a digital watch. All that flesh has its powerful influence or vibration and I feel this before I open the door. She raps twice on the panel and I turn off the TV and come out and follow her up the cushioned stairs. Rosy rays of moon or something similar strike down from the skylight and her body is made up of planetary conjunctions: Venus and Mars, Neptune and Jupiter, Pluto and Uranus. I follow her, thin as a blade. My bones are there for all to see.

When she opens her door the room is filled to the threshold with flesh. It bars our entry and she apologizes smilingly. "So full tonight! It's not often that so many find the time. Excuse a moment..."

She prods and pushes. She sighs and becomes exasperated. She lifts an arm here, flattens a knee there, smooths aside shoulders and backs. She cajoles and requests and the barrier shifts. I hear a few irritated murmurs and then a sharp collective gasp. Close-by I can see a hank of body-hair, the underside of a foot with its round pads of toes. Someone's brown eye blinks or winks. When everything's still again there's a tunnel lit by flesh-coloured light.

Magda looks at her wristwatch. "I think we ought to begin," she says.

The tunnel is tailor-made, just wide enough for me to insert myself. I have my doubts at first, even suspicions, but Magda prompts. "Please, some of them have trains to catch..."

She smiles into my face, melting my rigidity. "We're all very clean," she whispers, jokingly. I feel as if I've accused her of something monstrous and start to blush. I hide my face in the mouth of the tunnel. It's warmer in there, body-temperature as you might expect, and there's a changing-room smell of soap and talc. The surface is yielding with a bloom of fine hair. Someone sneezes and apologizes. I lean forward until my weight shifts and my feet leave the floor. I make good progress in my low friction clothes but the way still stretches ahead. Magda's room must be much larger than mine.

I look back once and see her face in a closing

sphincter. She smiles at me again. She waves. I know I'm the key to all this flesh. "Love," she says, as if it's the only word in the language.

"Different from *who*?" Muriel asked.
"I meant different from what I expected."

The park stretched to shrubberies and shed-like buildings, a white line of lake with trees behind. Over our heads a big sycamore soaked up the rain. Frank was on the early shift all that week.

"So how's that?"

"I suppose she carries it well. With dignity. If you think of it as a sort of disablement... *Dimensionally challenged*, you could say."

"She's huge, then?"

"She's gigantic."

Muriel nodded. I thought that she was affected, moved. I kissed her cold hair. She twisted in my arms and pushed her face up at me. There was a gust of wind and the tree made a light clatter and showered us with big sappy drops. I pulled at my cape to cover us both. Our bikes leaned together in the rain.

Sandor the quiet Czech was crushed by a travelling crane. He had no family, no friends outside the agency, nothing. His remains were cremated. Big Neil and I stormed the North Circular, scattering the ashes from our panniers.

I met Magda as I was coming out of the bathroom. The cistern filled noisily behind me and I recalled her nakedness in the dream. "You're sad," she said.

"A friend."

I explained. Her face blossomed with horror and sympathy. "How terrible! Tragic. A young man...?"

"Relatively."

"And so much to give. So sad."

There was something happening above us. From beyond the turn of the stairs I could just hear the singing.

"You must visit us once," Magda said gently. "Just to see. You might find it useful... But please not tonight," She smiled. "Tonight we're so - *disorganized*."

She flicked the fingers of one hand. She wore another colourful and shimmery outfit with a red bow in her pinned-up hair. One of her shoulders was uncovered and shone in the light from the skylight.

"But soon," she said. "Pretty soon."

We listened to the impatient hoot of a taxi. I shook her round hand again.

"And you yourself," she asked. "Are you ill?"

"Not to my knowledge."

She nodded, compressing the flesh below her chin. I listened to her exact steps as she went down the stairs. I lingered on the landing and wondered if McCallister had been listening from his room. I thought I could detect his gimlet-thin attention.

He stopped me in the hall that night. He stood before his open door as if at the furthest extension of a very strong spring. At a sound from upstairs he might retreat in the wink of an eye.

"Madame Magda!" he said, twitching his shoulder. He made her sound like a palmist or clairvoyant.

"Madame Magda," McCallister said or whispered. "She's a sticky one."

"Sticky?"

He leered at me suddenly. Under the shaded lamp his teeth were a translucent green. "You shouldn't get too close, sonny. Not to that one. I'm nothing and nobody but if I had my way..."

He stopped and listened. Probably she was out or he'd never have dared so much. His room was dim and brown behind him with a smell like stale cake.

"Well, what would you do?" I asked.

He straightened himself and lifted his upper lip. "What? What would I do...?" His mouth opened and closed as if the words were too big. "Why, I'd scald them like a nest of slugs."

I had another Magda dream. The sun was low and she took me to her cot between the hills. A secret valley. A headless statue of Lenin brooded in the middle distance. Wolves called from the heights. Magda bit my ear. "So *thin*," she said, touching me. She stroked my ribs and then fed me with her breast. I felt such comfort. I woke in the night, ashamed.

"I have to go," Muriel said.
"It's not even ten yet."
"I just have to go: I'm confused."

"So what's the problem?"

I could see her eyes watering. I thought it was frustration. "Look, I can't behave as if he's a stranger. Do you think we never talk or something?"

I carried her cycle downstairs. I could hear a voice through McCallister's door: Radio 4. She kissed me on the side of the mouth. "I still care about him," she said. "About his welfare. It hurts me to see him unhappy. After all this time he's almost flesh and blood. My own, I mean."

"Flesh," I said.

Outside she wheeled her bike slightly ahead of me and the lamps shone on the glossy side of her hair. The gears made their little tune. "That *fat* woman," she said.

"She's not really fat - she's just on a different scale to most people."

"I saw her tonight, in the street. I knew her straight away. It's disgusting."

"Attitudes are changing nowadays."

"Personally I don't think there's much excuse for it. We know so much about nutrition now and she could always spend an hour at the gym."

"I don't think she's a gym type of person."

We were angry. There was murder between us for about five minutes. We walked five or six streets without talking and my legs felt like bits of string. I stopped a foot behind her, a hand on her shoulder. "Do you think I've lost weight?" I asked. "Recently?"

She turned in my direction without exactly looking at me. "I suppose you have."

"A lot?"

"Quite a bit."

I knew that quite a bit was all I had.

"We ought to say goodbye now," Muriel said. "Just in case... *Here*."

Some clouds. The way they move with such ease. Weightless; I suppose. Then a face pushes in. Dark against the light. The mouth chews and hisses. "Fell mate. Just over sideways. Went slack right under my wheels. Lucky you –"

He goes instantly silent when I turn my head. It hurts. Something gluey at the back connects it to the tarmac. My earphones whisper from a yard away. My bike is twisted over the kerb as if it had melted and set that way.

I discharge myself around midnight. Bruises and abrasion, slight memory loss. My condition gives cause for concern; they want to keep me but I say no. I catch a cab and spend the next day in bed. I listen to the feet going up and the noises beyond the ceiling. Magda laughs like a bird. I watch TV, a football match, the final stages. When it's over McCallister explodes from his room. The door crashes shut behind him. He stands at the foot of the stairs and shouts awful things about fatness and obesity. It's ugly and unnatural. It's an abomination and against God. There's no excuse for it, not nowadays. Then I hear footsteps coming down, shaking the landing, descending. There's a ringing crack, flesh to flesh, and they rise again, more slowly.

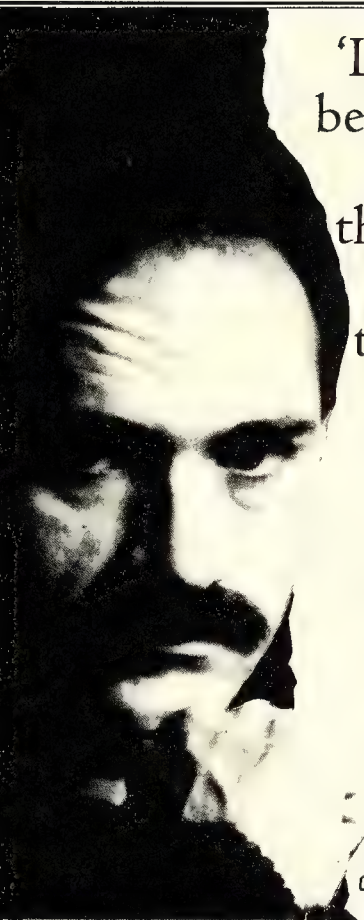
I rise from the bed. I feel the planetary tug of all that fat, and climb the stairs stiffly. I go up to the

room. I've never been this far before and the carpet is different – broad and patterned, cushioning my feet. I pause at the turn of the stairs. I want to ask questions, contrast and compare. I want to apologize for my dreams. The door and its frame are glossy and milk-coloured, freshly decorated. Instead of a bell there's a brass knocker like a full-rigged ship. The fat people stand behind the door.

Stephen Blanchard is another new British writer. Born in Hull in 1950, he has had one story published in *London Magazine*. He now lives in South London and works as a postman.

Back issues of *Interzone* are available at £2.50 each (£2.80 overseas) from the address shown on page 3.

STEPHEN



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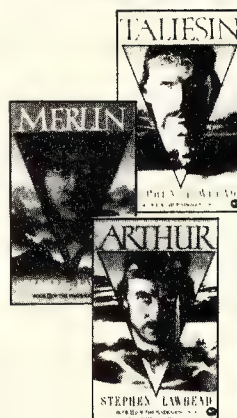
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LAWHEAD

Barry N. Malzberg

An Annotated Bibliography

Andrew Tidmarsh

Barry N(athaniel) Malzberg claims to be the author of some 75 novels (published under his own and a variety of other names including Mike Barry, Mel Johnson, and K.M. O'Donnell) and some two hundred short stories.

He sold his first science-fiction short story, "We're Coming Through the Windows," on 11 January 1967; his second, "Final War" (a Nebula Award nominee, 1968), appeared in April 1968; eight years later he announced his retirement from the field. Between 1967 and 1975, he was the most prolific of writers of science fiction. The following list includes only those novels that have been published as sf (under the names Barry Malzberg and K.M. O'Donnell) and only those short stories that have been collected in book form.

Two other books ought to be mentioned: a novel, *The Running of Beasts* (1976), written with Bill Pronzini, which – to quote Francis M. Nevins Jr – "may well be the finest suspense book written since the death of Cornell Woolrich," and a collection of essays, *The Engines of the Night: Science Fiction in the Eighties* (1980).

To my knowledge, not one of the items listed is currently in print.

The Empty People (1969) (as K.M. O'Donnell)

Archer's brain has been invaded by cancer, "the inner alien." Will it destroy him or, otherwise, control the destiny of his world? An obsessive theme (others include paranoid astronauts, political assassinations, marital breakdowns, and horse racing) to which Malzberg returns in *The Men Inside*.

Final War and Other Fantasies (1969) (as K.M. O'Donnell)

A collection containing "Final War," "Death to the Keeper," "A Triptych," "How I take their Measure," "Oaten," "The Ascension," "The Major Incitement to Riot," "Cop-Out," "We're Coming Through the Windows," "The Market in Aliens" and "By Right of Succession."

In the Pocket and Other SF Stories (1970) (as K.M. O'Donnell)

A collection containing "In the Pocket," "Gehenna," "Ah, Fair Uranus," "Notes Just Prior to the Fall," "As Between Generations," "The Falcon and the Falconeer," "July 24, 1970," "Pacem Est," "The New Rappacini," "Bat," "A Question of Slant," "What Time Was That?," "A Soulsong to the Sad,

Silly, Soaring Sixties," "Addendum" and "The Idea."

Dwellers of the Deep (1970) (as K.M. O'Donnell) and **Gather in the Hall of the Planets** (1971) (as K.M. O'Donnell)

Two essentially trivial novels in which the fate of the Earth is to be decided at a science-fiction convention.

Universe Day (1971) (as K.M. O'Donnell)

An assemblage of shorter pieces from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Galaxy*, *Infinity*, and *Nova* of "the men who went after the stars."

The Falling Astronauts (1971)

The first Malzberg sf novel and the first of three to present an "alternative" view of the US Space Programme. To be followed by *Revelations* and *Beyond Apollo*.

Revelations: A Paranoid Novel of Suspense (1972)

Foreshadowed by the story "Death to the Keeper" (1968). A TV talk show's apparent "revelation" that the US Space Programme "never got off the ground."

Beyond Apollo (1972)

Controversial winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the Best SF Novel of 1972. "A Brief History of the Universe: The Universe was invented by man in 1976 as a cheap and easy explanation for all his difficulties in conquering it." Astronaut Harold Evans returns from Venus with no other – no better – explanation for the failure of the mission. Highly recommended.

Overlay (1972)

An expansion of the story "Notes Just Prior to the Fall" (1969). In Charles Platt's opinion, *Overlay* "is notable for its absurdist interplay between aliens and a race-track better" and "is related to *Underlay*, a charming comedy, without sf content, in the Damon Runyon mode." Malzberg "was a dedicated horseplayer...and of course a loser." Recommended.

The Men Inside (1973)

A splicing together of the stories "In the Pocket"

(1969) and "The Men Inside"/"The Men in the Pocket" (1972). The autobiography of a disciple of the Hulm Institute, condemned to return time and again to the corrupt bodies of the weak and aged and to bring them life. The first of three allegorical novels to consider the entrapment of a writer by science fiction. Malzberg returns again and again to the familiar themes of the field in an attempt to revitalize them. To be followed by *In the Enclosure* and *Galaxies*. Highly recommended.

In the Enclosure (1973)

A second novel of the writer's (i.e. Malzberg's) entrapment by science fiction. Quir – an alien – is imprisoned, tortured, humiliated for co-operating with his captors. Recommended.

Herovit's World (1973)

In his introduction to the story "Linkage" in *The Best of...Malzberg* writes "granted that SF...sits upon paranoid, megalomaniacal, solipsistic visions, do these visions have literal truth, or are they merely neurotic and in extreme cases psychotic? Can they be taken seriously as serious probings of possible futures of humanity, or are they merely conventional power fantasies for conventionally disturbed adolescents and adolescents at heart?" In this novel, Malzberg shows science fiction to have been constructed rather than to have emerged from a writer's experience of life. An ironic counterpoint may be found in the story "A Question of Slant" (1971). Highly recommended.

Phase IV (1973)

A novelization of the film *Phase IV* (1973) directed by Saul Bass. Story and screenplay by Mayo Simon.

Tactics of Conquest (1974)

An expansion of the story "Closed Sicilian" (1973). A novel in which the fate of the Universe is to be decided by a game of chess: but one of the players is a fool!

The Destruction of the Temple (1974)

An expansion of the story "City Lights, City Nights" (1974) within the framework of the story "A Soul-song to the Sad, Silly, Soaring Sixties" (1969). A director comes to the charred ruins of New York city to re-enact the assassination of John F. Kennedy but is himself – so it seems – shot. Recommended.

The Day of the Burning (1974)

George Mercer, an employee (as was Malzberg) of the New York City Department of Welfare, has twelve hours in which to prepare a case for the admission of Earth to the Galactic Federation.

On a Planet Alien (1974)

Travellers from the Earth's future mistakenly return to the Earth's past and are thought, by its inhabitants, to be its creators.

The Sodom and Gomorrah Business (1974)

Another (oblique) re-enactment of the assassination of John F. Kennedy – and others – among the ruins of New York City.

Guernica Night (1974)

An expansion of the story "The Ballad of Slick Sid" (1972). According to Joyce Carol Oates in the *New York Times*, "a mysterious and provocative work ... quite powerful." Recommended.

Out From Ganymede (1974)

A collection containing "Out from Ganymede," "November 22, 1963," "Still-Life," "Two Odysseys into the Centre," "Linkage," "The Union Forever," "Yearbook," "Inter Alia," "Allowances," "The Helmet," "Breaking In," "Pater Familias," (with Kris Neville), "Causation," "The Art of Fiction," "A Short Religious Novel," "Report of the Defense," "Notes for a novel about the first ever ship to Venus," "Beyond Sleep," "The Interceptor," "Agony Column" and "The Sense of the Fire."

Galaxies (1975)

An expansion of the story "A Galaxy Called Rome" (1975). A third allegorical novel of Malzberg's entrapment by science fiction. "Science Fiction" – he explains – "is not a series of working models for the future but merely a sub-genre of romantic fiction which employs the future as historical would use the past...as a convention." In these "notes," Malzberg charts his escape to the mainstream (or, otherwise, to destruction). Highly recommended.

Conversations (1975)

An expansion of the story "Fireday, Firenight" (1974). A Young Adult novel, similar to *The Day of the Burning*.

The Gamesman (1975)

"The only escape from mind-blowing monotony is the Game."

The Many Worlds of Barry Malzberg (1975)

A collection containing "Initiation," "Management," "The Union Forever," "Reconstitution," "Final War," "Closed Sicilian," "After the Unfortunate Accident," "The Second Short Shortest Fantasy Story Ever Published," "In the Cup," "Death to the Keeper" and "Chronicles of a Comer."

Scop (1976)

Scop, obsessed by the political assassinations of the 1960s, returns from the 21st century to prevent them. He discovers that he is – or may well be – the assassin, Lee Harvey Osborn (sic). A dense, allusive novel. Highly recommended.

Down Here in the Dream Quarter (1976)

A collection containing "A Galaxy Called Rome," "Thirty-Seven Northwest," "Sedan Deville," "State of the Art," "Isaiah," "On the Campaign Trail," "Report to Headquarters," "Streaking," "Making it to Gaxton Falls on the Red Planet in the Year of Our Lord," "After the Great Space War," "Trashing," "Vox Populi," "Fireday, Firenight," "Making the Connections," "January, 1975," "The Destruction and Exculpation of Earth," "Transfer," "The Ballad of Slick Sid," "Notes Leading Down to the Events at Bedlam," "Seeking Assistance," "Redundancy," "Leviticus: In the Ark" and two essays, "Rage, Pain, Alienation and other Aspects of the Writing of

Science Fiction" (in which Malzberg announces his retirement from the field) and "Down Here in the Dream Quarter." Recommended.

The Best of Barry Malzberg (1976)

A collection containing "A Reckoning," "Letting it All Hang Out," "The Man in the Pocket," "Pater Familias" (with Kris Neville), "Going Down," "Those Wonderful Years," "On Ice," "Revolution," "Ups and Downs," "Bearing Witness," "At the Institute," "Making it Through," "Tapping Out," "Closed Sicilian," "Linkage," "Introduction to the Second Edition," "Trial of Blood," "Getting Around," "Track Two," "The Battered-Earth Syndrome," "Network," "A Delightful Comedic Premise," "Geraniums" (with Valerie King), "City Lights, City Nights," "Culture Lock," "As in a Vision Apprehended," "Form in Remission," "Opening Fire," "Running Around," "Overlooking," "Twenty Sixty-One," "Closing the Deal," "What the Board Said," "Uncoupling," "Over the Line," "Try Again," "An Oversight" and "And Still in the Darkness," An unsurpassed collection. Highly recommended.

The Last Transaction (1977)

"A deep and fascinating glimpse into the memories, inner compulsions, torments, and triumphs" of William Eric Springer, President of the USA, 1980-1984.

Chorale (1978)

An expansion of the story "Chorale" (1977). A time

traveller becomes Beethoven in order to study his ninth symphony.

Malzberg at Large (1979)

A collection containing the novel *Dwellers of the Deep* and the stories "Final War," "Death to the Keeper," "Gehenna," "Notes Just Prior to the Fall" and "A Soulsong to the Sad, Silly, Soaring Sixties."

The Man Who Loved the Midnight Lady (1980)

A collection containing a mixture of short stories and essays, among them "Here, for Just a While," "In the Stocks," "Indigestion," "Varieties of Religious Experience" and "Another Burnt-Out Case" (with Bill Pronzini).

The Cross of Fire (1982)

An expansion of the story "Le Croix (the Cross)" (1980). According to Brian Stableford, "an alienated member of a rationalistic and technocratic future culture sets out to study religious experience first hand." He becomes Jesus Christ.

The Re-Making of Sigmund Freud (1985)

An expansion of the story "Sigmund in Space" (1980). An android simulacrum of Sigmund Freud is created to treat the collective manias and neuroses of the crew of the *Whipperley*, on their way to Venus. Recommended.

The above is the second in a series of annotated bibliographies which began with a C.J. Cherryh checklist (by Neil Jones) in Interzone 55. We shall be publishing more, and welcome suggestions and offers of help from knowledgeable readers.

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Unstable Orbits in the Space of Lies

Greg Egan

I always feel safest sleeping on the freeway – or at least, those stretches of it that happen to lie in regions of approximate equilibrium between the surrounding attractors. With our sleeping bags laid out carefully along the fading white lines between the northbound lanes (perhaps because of a faint hint of geomancy reaching up from Chinatown – not quite drowned out by the influence of scientific humanism from the east, liberal Judaism from the west, and some vehement anti-spiritual, anti-intellectual hedonism from the north), I can close my eyes safe in the knowledge that Maria and I are not going to wake up believing, wholeheartedly and irrevocably, in Papal infallibility, the sentience of Gaia, the delusions of insight induced by meditation, or the miraculous healing powers of tax reform.

So when I wake to find the sun already clear of the horizon – and Maria gone – I don't panic. No faith, no world view, no belief system, no culture, could have reached out in the night and claimed her. The borders of the basins of attraction *do* fluctuate, advancing and retreating by tens of metres daily – but it's highly unlikely that any of them could have penetrated this far into our precious wasteland of anomie and doubt. I can't think why she would have walked off and left me, without a word – but Maria does things, now and then, that I find wholly inexplicable. And vice versa. Even after a year together, we still have that.

I don't panic – but I don't linger, either. I don't want to get too far behind. I rise to my feet, stretching, and try to decide which way she would have headed; unless the local conditions have changed since she departed, that should be much the same as asking where I want to go, myself.

The attractors can't be fought, they can't be resisted – but it's possible to steer a course between them, to navigate the contradictions. The easiest way to start out is to make use of a strong, but moderately distant attractor to build up momentum – while taking care to arrange to be deflected at the last minute by a countervailing influence.

Choosing the first attractor – the belief to which surrender must be feigned – is always a strange business. Sometimes it feels, almost literally, like *sniffing the wind*, like following an external trail; sometimes it seems like pure introspection, like trying to determine “my own” true beliefs...and sometimes the whole idea of making a distinction between these

apparent opposites seems misguided. Yeah, very fucking Zen – and that's how it strikes me now... which in itself just about answers the question. The balance here is delicate, but one influence is marginally stronger: Eastern philosophies are definitely more compelling than the alternatives, from where I stand – and knowing the purely geographical reasons for this doesn't really make it any less true. I piss on the chain-link fence between the freeway and the railway line, to hasten its decay, then I roll up my sleeping bag, take a swig of water from my canteen, hoist my pack, and start walking.

A bakery's robot delivery van speeds past me, and I curse my solitude; without elaborate preparations, it takes at least two agile people to make use of them: one to block the vehicle's path, the other to steal the food. Losses through theft are small enough that the people of the attractors seem to tolerate them; presumably, greater security measures just aren't worth the cost – although no doubt the inhabitants of each ethical monoculture have their own unique “reasons” for not starving us amoral tramps into submission. I take out a sickly carrot which I dug from one of my vegetable gardens when I passed by last night; it makes a pathetic breakfast, but as I chew on it, I think about the bread rolls that I'll steal when I'm back with Maria again, and my anticipation almost overshadows the bland, woody taste of the present.

The freeway curves gently south-east. I reach a section flanked by deserted factories and abandoned houses, and against this background of relative silence, the tug of Chinatown, straight ahead now, grows stronger and clearer. That glib label – “Chinatown” – was always an oversimplification, of course; before Meltdown, the area contained at least a dozen distinct cultures besides Hong Kong and Malaysian Chinese, from Korean to Cambodian, from Thai to Timorese – and several varieties of every religion from Buddhism to Islam. All of that diversity has vanished now, and the homogeneous amalgam that finally stabilized would probably seem utterly bizarre to any individual pre-Meltdown inhabitant of the district. To the present-day citizens, of course, the strange hybrid feels exactly right; that's the definition of *stability*, the whole reason the attractors exist. If I marched right into Chinatown, not only would I find myself sharing the local values and beliefs, I'd be perfectly happy to stay that way for the rest of my life.

I don't expect that I'll march right in, though – any

more than I expect the Earth to dive straight into the Sun. It's been almost four years since Meltdown, and no attractor has captured me yet.

I've heard dozens of "explanations" for the events of that day, but I find most of them equally dubious – rooted as they are in the world views of particular attractors. One way in which I sometimes think of it, on January 12th, 2018, the human race must have crossed some kind of unforeseen threshold – of global population, perhaps – and suffered a sudden, irreversible change of psychic state.

Telepathy is not the right word for it; after all, nobody found themselves drowning in an ocean of babbling voices; nobody suffered the torment of empathic overload. The mundane chatter of consciousness stayed locked inside our heads; our quotidian mental privacy remained unbreached. (Or perhaps, as some have suggested, everyone's mental privacy was *so thoroughly breached* that the sum of our transient thoughts forms a blanket of featureless white noise covering the planet, which the brain filters out effortlessly.)

In any case, for whatever reason, the second-by-second soap operas of other people's inner lives remained, mercifully, as inaccessible as ever...but our skulls became completely permeable to each other's values and beliefs, each other's deepest convictions.

At first, this meant pure chaos. My memories of the time are confused and nightmarish; I wandered the city for a day and a night (I think), finding God (or some equivalent) anew every six seconds – seeing no visions, hearing no voices, but wrenched from faith to faith by invisible forces of dream logic. People moved in a daze, cowed and staggering – while ideas moved between us like lightning. Revelation followed contradictory revelation. I wanted it to stop, badly – I would have prayed for it to stop, if God had stayed the same long enough to be prayed to. I've heard other tramps compare these early mystical convulsions to drug rushes, to orgasms, to being picked up and dumped by ten metre waves, ceaselessly, hour after hour – but looking back, I find myself reminded most of a bout of gastroenteritis I once suffered: a long, feverish night of interminable vomiting and diarrhoea. Every muscle, every joint in my body ached, my skin[^]burned; I felt as if I was dying. And every time I thought I lacked the strength to expel anything more from my body, another spasm took hold of me. By four in the morning, my helplessness seemed positively transcendental: the peristaltic reflex possessed me like some harsh – but ultimately benevolent – deity. At the time, it was the most religious experience I'd ever been through.

All across the city, competing belief systems fought for allegiance, mutating and hybridizing along the way...like those random populations of computer viruses they used to unleash against each other in experiments to demonstrate subtle points of evolutionary theory. Or perhaps like the historical clashes of the very same beliefs – with the length and time scales drastically shortened by the new mode of interaction – and a lot less bloodshed, now that the ideas themselves could do battle in a purely mental arena, rather than employing sword-wielding Crusaders or exter-

mination camps. Or, like a swarm of demons set loose upon the Earth to possess all but the righteous...

The chaos didn't last long. In some places seeded by pre-Meltdown clustering of cultures and religions – and in other places, by pure chance – certain belief systems gained enough of an edge, enough of a foothold, to start spreading out from a core of believers into the surrounding random detritus, capturing adjacent, disordered populations where no dominant belief had yet emerged. The more territory these snowballing attractors conquered, the faster they grew. Fortunately – in this city, at least – no single attractor was able to expand unchecked; they all ended up hemmed in, sooner or later, by equally powerful neighbours – or confined by sheer lack of population at the city's outskirts, and near voids of non-residential land.

Within a week of Meltdown, the anarchy had crystallized into more-or-less the present configuration, with ninety-nine percent of the population having moved – or changed – until they were content to be exactly where – and who – they were.

I happened to end up between attractors – affected by many, but captured by none – and I've managed to stay in orbit ever since. Whatever the knack is, I seem to have it; over the years, the ranks of the tramps have thinned, but a core of us remain free.

In the early years, the people of the attractors used to send up robot helicopters to scatter pamphlets over the city, putting the case for their respective metaphors for what had happened – as if a well-chosen analogy for the disaster might be enough to win them converts; it took a while for some of them to understand that the written word had been rendered obsolete as a vector for indoctrination. Ditto for audiovisual techniques – and that still hasn't sunk in everywhere. Not long ago, on a battery-powered TV set in an abandoned house, Maria and I picked up a broadcast from a network of rationalist enclaves, showing an alleged "simulation" of Meltdown as a colour-coded dance of mutually carnivorous pixels, obeying a few simple mathematical rules. The commentator spouted jargon about self-organizing systems – and lo, with the magic of hindsight, the flickers of colour rapidly evolved into the familiar pattern of hexagonal cells, isolated by moats of darkness (unpopulated except for the barely visible presence of a few unimportant specks; we wondered which ones were meant to be us).

I don't know how things would have turned out if there hadn't been the pre-existing infrastructure of robots and telecommunications to allow people to live and work without travelling outside their own basins – the regions guaranteed to lead back to the central attractor – most of which are only a kilometre or two wide. (In fact, there must be many places where that infrastructure wasn't present, but I haven't been exactly plugged into the global village these last few years, so I don't know how they've fared.) Living on the margins of this society makes me even more dependent on its wealth than those who inhabit its multiple centres, so I suppose I should be glad that most people are content with the status quo – and I'm certainly delighted that they can co-exist in peace, that they can trade and prosper.

I'd rather die than join them, that's all.

(Or at least, that's true right here, right now.)

The trick is to keep moving, to maintain momentum. There are no regions of perfect neutrality – or if there are, they're too small to find, probably too small to inhabit, and they'd almost certainly drift as the conditions within the basins varied. Near enough is fine for a night, but if I tried to live in one place, day after day, week after week, then whichever attractor held even the slightest advantage would, eventually, begin to sway me.

Momentum, and confusion. Whether or not it's true that we're spared each other's inner voices because so much uncorrelated babbling simply cancels itself out, my aim is to do just that with the more enduring, more coherent, more pernicious parts of the signal. At the very centre of the Earth, no doubt, the sum of all human beliefs adds up to pure, harmless noise; here on the surface, though, where it's physically impossible to be equidistant from everyone, I'm forced to keep moving to average out the effects as best I can.

Sometimes I daydream about heading out into the countryside, and living in glorious clear-headed solitude beside a robot-tended farm, stealing the equipment and supplies I need to grow all my own food. *With Maria?* If she'll come; sometimes she says yes, sometimes she says no. Half a dozen times, we've told ourselves that we're setting out on such a journey... but we've yet to discover a trajectory out of the city, a route that would take us safely past all the intervening attractors, without being gradually deflected back towards the urban centre. There must be a way out, it's simply a matter of finding it – and if all the rumours from other tramps have turned out to be dead ends, that's hardly surprising: the only people who could know for certain how to leave the city are those who've stumbled on the right path and actually departed, leaving no hints or rumours behind.

Sometimes, though, I stop dead in the middle of the road, and ask myself what I "really want":

To escape to the country, and lose myself in the silence of my own mute soul?

To give up this pointless wandering and rejoin civilization? For the sake of prosperity, stability, certainty: to swallow, and be swallowed by, one elaborate set of self-affirming lies?

Or, to keep orbiting this way until I die?

The answer, of course, depends on where I'm standing.

More robot trucks pass me, but I no longer give them a second glance. I picture my hunger as an object – another weight to carry, not much heavier than my pack – and it gradually recedes from my attention. I let my mind grow blank, and I think of nothing but the early morning sunshine on my face, and the pleasure of walking.

After a while, a startling clarity begins to wash over me; a deep tranquillity, together with a powerful sense of understanding. The odd part is, I have no idea what it is that I think I *understand*; I'm experiencing the pleasure of insight without any apparent cause, without the faintest hope of replying to the question: *insight into what?* The feeling persists, regardless.



Illustrations by Iain Byers

I think: I've travelled in circles, all these years, and where has it brought me?

To this moment. To this chance to take my first real steps along the path to enlightenment.

And all I have to do is keep walking, straight ahead.

For four years, I've been following a false *tao* – pursuing an illusion of freedom, striving for no reason but the sake of striving – but now I see the way to transform that journey into –

Into what? A short-cut to damnation?

"Damnation"? There's no such thing. Only *samsara*, the treadmill of desires. Only the futility of striving. My understanding is clouded, now – but I know that if I travelled a few steps further, the truth would soon become clear to me.

For several seconds, I'm paralyzed by indecision – shot through with pure dread – but then, drawn by the possibility of redemption, I leave the freeway, clamber over the fence, and head due south.

These side streets are familiar. I pass a car yard full of sun-bleached wrecks melting in slow motion, their plastic chassis triggered by disuse into autodegradation; a video porn and sex-aids shop, facade intact, dark within, stinking of rotting carpet and mouse shit; an outboard motor showroom, the latest – four-year-old – fuel cell models proudly on display already looking like bizarre relics from another century.

Then the sight of the cathedral spire rising above all this squalor hits me with a giddy mixture of nostalgia and *déjà vu*. In spite of everything, part of me still feels like a true Prodigal Son, coming home for the first time – not passing through for the fiftieth. I mumble prayers and phrases of dogma, strangely comforting formulae reawakened from memories of my last perihelion.

Soon, only one thing puzzles me: how could I have known God's perfect love – and then walked away? It's unthinkable. *How could I have turned my back on Him?*

I come to a row of pristine houses; I know they're uninhabited, but here in the border zone the diocesan robots keep the lawns trimmed, the leaves swept, the walls painted. A few blocks further, south-west, and I'll never turn my back on the truth again. I head that way, gladly.

Almost gladly.

The only trouble is... with each step south it grows harder to ignore the fact that the scriptures – let alone Catholic dogma – are full of the most grotesque errors of fact and logic. Why should a revelation from a perfect, loving God be such a dog's breakfast of threats and contradictions? Why should it offer such a flawed and confused view of humanity's place in the universe?

Errors of fact? The metaphors had to be chosen to suit the world view of the day; should God have mystified the author of Genesis with details of the Big Bang, and primordial nucleosynthesis? *Contradictions?* Tests of faith – and humility. How can I be so arrogant as to set my wretched powers of reasoning against the Word of the Almighty? God transcends everything, logic included.

Logic especially.

It's no good. Virgin births? Miracles with loaves and fishes? Resurrection? Poetic fables only, not to be taken literally? If that's the case, though, what's

left but a few well-intentioned homilies, and a lot of pompous theatrics? If God *did in fact* become man, suffer, die, and rise again to save me, then I owe Him everything... but if it's just a beautiful story, then I can love my neighbour with or without regular doses of bread and wine.

I veer south-east.

The truth about the universe (here) is infinitely stranger, and infinitely more grand: it lies in the Laws of Physics that have come to Know Themselves through humanity. Our destiny and purpose are encoded in the fine structure constant, and the value of the density omega. The human race – in whatever form, robot or organic – will keep on advancing for the next ten billion years, until we can give rise to the hyperintelligence which will cause the finely tuned Big Bang required to bring us into existence.

If we don't die out in the next few millennia.

In which case, other intelligent creatures will perform the task. It doesn't matter who carries the torch.

Exactly. None of it matters. Why should I care what a civilization of post-humans, robots, or aliens, might or might not do ten billion years from now? What does any of this grandiose shit have to do with me?

I finally catch sight of Maria, a few blocks ahead of me – and right on cue, the existentialist attractor to the west firmly steers me away from the suburbs of cosmic baroque. I increase my pace, but only slightly – it's too hot to run, but more to the point, sudden acceleration can have some peculiar side-effects, bringing on unexpected philosophical swerves.

As I narrow the gap, she turns at the sound of my footsteps.

I say, "Hi."

"Hi." She doesn't seem exactly thrilled to see me – but then, this isn't exactly the place for it.

I fall into step beside her. "You left without me."

She shrugs. "I wanted to be on my own for a while. I wanted to think things over."

I laugh. "If you wanted to *think*, you should have stayed on the freeway."

"There's another spot ahead. In the park. It's just as good."

She's right – although now I'm here to spoil it for her. I ask myself for the thousandth time: *Why do I want us to stay together?* Because of what we have in common? But we owe most of that to the very fact that we are together – travelling the same paths, corrupting each other with our proximity. Because of our differences, then? For the sake of occasional moments of mutual incomprehensibility? But the longer we're together, the more that vestige of mystery will be eroded; orbiting each other can only lead to a spiraling together, an end to all distinctions.

Why, then?

The honest answer (here and now) is: food and sex – although tomorrow, elsewhere, no doubt I'll look back and brand that conclusion a cynical lie.

I fall silent as we drift towards the equilibrium zone. The last few minutes' confusion still rings in my head, satisfyingly jumbled, the giddy succession of truncated epiphanies effectively cancelling each other out, leaving nothing behind but an amorphous sense of distrust. I remember a school of thought from pre-

Meltdown days which proclaimed, with bovine good intentions – confusing laudable tolerance with sheer credulity – that there was something of value in every *human philosophy*... and what's more, when you got right down to it, they all really spoke the same "universal truths," and were all, ultimately, *reconcilable*. Apparently, none of these supine ecumenicists have survived to witness the palpable disproof of their hypothesis; I expect they all converted, three seconds after Meltdown, to the faith of whoever was standing closest to them at the time.

Maria mutters angrily, "Wonderful!" I look up at her, then follow her gaze. The park has come into view, and if it's time to herself she wanted, she has more than me to contend with. At least two dozen other tramps are gathered in the shade. That's rare, but it does happen; equilibrium zones are the slowest parts of everybody's orbits, so I suppose it's not surprising that occasionally a group of us end up becalmed together.

As we come closer, I notice something stranger: everybody reclining on the grass is facing the same way. Watching something – or someone – hidden from view by the trees.

Someone. A woman's voice reaches us, the words indistinct at this distance, but the tone mellifluous. Confident. Gentle but persuasive.

Maria says nervously, "Maybe we should stay back. Maybe the equilibrium's shifted."

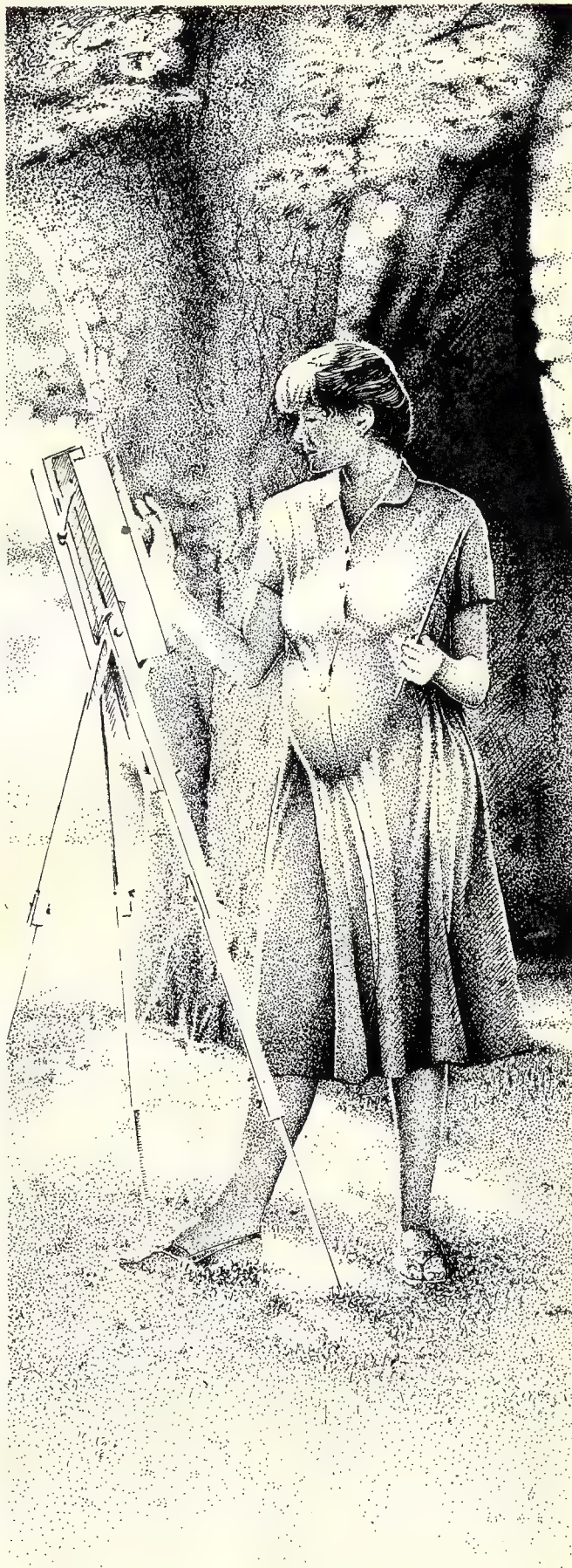
"Maybe." I'm as worried as she is – but intrigued as well. I don't feel much of a tug from any of the familiar local attractors – but then, I can't be sure that my curiosity itself isn't a new hook for an old idea.

I say, "Let's just... skirt around the rim of the park. We can't ignore this; we have to find out what's going on." If a nearby basin has expanded and captured the park, then keeping our distance from the speaker is no guarantee of freedom; it's not her words, or her lone presence, that could harm us – but Maria (knowing all this, I'm sure) accepts my "strategy" for warding off the danger, and nods assent.

We position ourselves in the middle of the road at the eastern edge of the park, without noticeable effect. The speaker, middle-aged I'd guess, looks every inch a tramp, from the dirt-stiff clothes to the crudely-cut hair to the weathered skin and lean build of a half-starved perennial walker. Only the voice is wrong. She's set up a frame, like an easel, on which she's stretched a large map of the city; the roughly hexagonal cells of the basins are neatly marked in a variety of colours. People used to swap maps like this all the time, in the early years; maybe she's just showing off her prize possession, hoping to trade it for something worthwhile. I don't think much of her chances; by now, I'm sure, every tramp relies on his or her own mental picture of the ideological terrain.

Then she lifts a pointer and traces part of a feature I'd missed: a delicate web of blue lines, weaving through the gaps between the hexagons.

The woman says, "But of course it's no accident. We haven't stayed out of the basins all these years by sheer good luck – or even skill." She looks out across the crowd, notices us, pauses a moment, then says calmly, "*We've been captured by our own attractor.*"



It's nothing like the others – it's not a fixed set of beliefs, in a fixed location – but it's still an attractor, it's still drawn us to it from whatever unstable orbits we might have been on. I've mapped it – or part of it – and I've sketched it as well as I can. The true detail may be infinitely fine – but even from this crude representation, you should recognize paths that you've walked yourselves."

I stare at the map. From this distance, the blue strands are impossible to follow individually; I can see that they cover the route that Maria and I have taken, over the last few days, but –

An old man calls out, "You've scrawled a lot of lines between the basins. What does that prove?"

"Not between *all* the basins." She touches a point on the map. "Has anyone ever been here? Or here? Or here? No? Here? Or here? *Why not?* They're all wide corridors between attractors – they look as safe as any of the others. So why have we never been to these places? For the same reason nobody living in the fixed attractors has: they're not part of our territory; they're not part of our own attractor."

I know she's talking nonsense, but the phrase alone is enough to make me feel panicky, claustrophobic. Our own attractor. We've been captured by our own attractor. I scan the rim of the city on the map; the blue line never comes close to it. In fact, the line gets about as far from the centre as I've ever travelled, myself...

Proving what? Only that this woman has had no better luck than I have. If she'd escaped the city, she wouldn't be here to claim that escape was impossible.

A woman in the crowd – visibly pregnant – says, "You've drawn your own paths, that's all. You've stayed out of danger – I've stayed out of danger – we all know what places to avoid. That's all you're telling us. That's all we have in common."

"No!" The speaker traces a stretch of the blue line again. "This is *who we are*. We're not aimless wanderers; we're the people of this strange attractor. We have an identity – a unity – after all."

There's laughter, and a few desultory insults from the crowd. I whisper to Maria, "Do you know her? Have you seen her before?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so."

"You wouldn't have. Isn't it obvious? She's some kind of robot evangelist –"

"She doesn't talk much like one."

"Rationalist – not Christian or Mormon."

"Rationalists don't send evangelists."

"No? *Mapping strange attractors*; if that's not rationalist jargon, what is it?"

Maria shrugs. "Basins, attractors – they're all rationalist words, but everybody uses them. You know what they say: the Devil has the best tunes, but the rationalists have the best jargon. Words have to come from somewhere."

The woman says, "I'll build my church on sand. And I'll ask no one to follow me – and yet, you will. You all will."

I say, "Let's go." I take Maria's arm, but she pulls free angrily.

"Why are you so against her? Maybe she's right."

"Are you crazy?"

"Everyone else has an attractor – why can't we have one of our own? Stranger than all the rest. Look at it:

it's the most beautiful thing on the map."

I shake my head, horrified. "How can you say that? We've stayed free. We've struggled so hard to stay free."

She shrugs. "Maybe. Or maybe we've been captured by what you call freedom. Maybe we don't need to struggle any more. Is that so bad? If we're doing what we want, either way, why should we care?"

Without any fuss, the woman starts packing up her easel, and the crowd of tramps begins to disperse. Nobody seems to have been much affected by the brief sermon; everyone heads off calmly on their own chosen orbits.

I say, "The people in the basins are *doing what they want*. I don't want to be like them."

Maria laughs. "Believe me, you're not."

"No, you're right, I'm not: they're rich, fat and complacent; I'm starving, tired, and confused. And for what? Why am I living this way? That robot's trying to take away the one thing that makes it all worthwhile."

"Yeah? Well, I'm tired and hungry, too. And maybe an attractor of my own will *make it all worthwhile*."

"How?" I laugh derisively. "Will you worship it? Will you pray to it?"

"No. But I won't have to be afraid anymore. If we really have been captured – if the way we live is stable, after all – then putting one foot wrong won't matter: we'll be drawn back to our own attractor. We won't have to worry that the smallest mistake will send us sliding into one of the basins. If that's true, aren't you glad?"

I shake my head angrily. "That's bullshit – dangerous bullshit. Staying out of the basins is a skill, it's a gift. You know that. We navigate the channels, carefully, balancing the opposing forces –"

"Do we? I'm sick of feeling like a tight-rope walker."

"Being sick of it doesn't mean it isn't true! Don't you see? She wants us to be complacent! The more of us who start to think orbiting is easy, the more of us will end up captured by the basins –"

I'm distracted by the sight of the prophet hefting her possessions and setting off. I say, "Look at her: she may be a perfect imitation – but she's a robot, she's a fake. They've finally understood that their pamphlets and their preaching machines won't work, so they've sent a machine to lie to us about our freedom."

Maria says, "Prove it."

"What?"

"You've got a knife. If she's a robot, go after her, stop her, cut her open. Prove it."

The woman, the robot, crosses the park, heading north-west, away from us. I say, "You know me; I could never do that."

"If she's a robot, she won't feel a thing."

"But she looks human. I couldn't do it. I couldn't stick a knife into a perfect imitation of human flesh."

"Because you know she's not a robot. You know she's telling the truth."

Part of me is simply glad to be arguing with Maria, for the sake of proving our separateness – but part of me finds everything she's saying too painful to leave unchallenged.

I hesitate a moment, then I put down my pack and

sprint across the park towards the prophet.

She turns when she hears me, and stops walking. There's no one else nearby. I halt a few metres away from her, and catch my breath. She regards me with patient curiosity. I stare at her, feeling increasingly foolish. I can't pull a knife on her: she might not be a robot, after all – she might just be a tramp with strange ideas.

She says, "Did you want to ask me something?"

Almost without thinking, I blurt out, "How do you know nobody's ever left the city? How can you be so sure it's never happened?"

She shakes her head. "I didn't say that. The attractor looks like a closed loop to me. Anyone who's been captured by it could never leave. But other people may have escaped."

"What other people?"

"People who weren't in the attractor's basin."

I scowl, confused. "What basin? I'm not talking about the people of the basins, I'm talking about us."

She laughs. "I'm sorry. I don't mean the basins that lead to the fixed attractors. Our strange attractor has a basin, too: all the points that lead to it. I don't know what this basin's shape is: like the attractor itself, the detail could be infinitely fine. Not every point in the gaps between the hexagons would be part of it: some points must lead to the fixed attractors – that's why some tramps have been captured by them. Other points would belong to the strange attractor's basin. But others –"

"What?"

"Other points might lead to infinity. To escape."

"Which points?"

She shrugs. "Who knows? There could be two points, side by side, one leading into the strange attractor, one leading – eventually – out of the city. The only way to find out which is which would be to start at each point, and see what happens."

"But you said we'd all been captured, already –"

She nods. "After so many orbits, the basins must have emptied into their respective attractors. The attractors are the stable part: the basins lead into the attractors, but the attractors lead into themselves. Anyone who was destined for a fixed attractor must be in it by now – and anyone who was destined to leave the city has already gone. Those of us who are still in orbit will stay that way. We have to understand that, accept that, learn to live with it...and if that means inventing our own faith, our own religion –"

I grab her arm, draw my knife, and quickly scrape the point across her forearm. She yelps and pulls free, then clasps her hand to the wound. A moment later, she takes it away to inspect the damage, and I see the thin red line on her arm, and a rough wet copy on her palm.

"You lunatic!" she yells, backing away.

Maria approaches us. The probably-flesh-and-blood prophet addresses her: "He's mad! Get him off me!" Maria takes hold of my arm, then, inexplicably, leans towards me and puts her tongue in my ear. I burst out laughing. The woman steps back uncertainly, then turns and hurries away.

Maria says, "Not much of a dissection – but as far as it went, it was in my favour. I win."

I hesitate, then feign surrender.

"You win."

By nightfall, we end up on the freeway again; this time, to the east of the city centre. We gaze at the sky above the black silhouettes of abandoned office towers, our brains mildly scrambled by the residual effects of a nearby cluster of astrologers, as we eat the day's prize catch: a giant vegetarian pizza.

Finally, Maria says, "Venus has set. I think I ought to sleep now."

I nod. "I'll wait up for Mars."

Traces of the day's barrage drift through my mind, more or less at random – but I can still recall most of what the woman in the park told me.

After so many orbits, the basins must have emptied...

So by now, we've all ended up captured. But – how could she know that? How could she be sure?

And what if she's wrong? What if we haven't all, yet, arrived in our final resting place?

The astrologers say: None of her filthy, materialist, reductionist lies can be true. Except the ones about destiny. We like destiny. Destiny is fine.

I get up and walk a dozen metres south, neutralizing their contribution. Then I turn and watch Maria sleeping.

There could be two points, side by side, one leading into the strange attractor, one leading – eventually – out of the city. The only way to find out which is which would be to start at each point, and see what happens.

Right now, everything she said sounds to me like some heavily distorted and badly misunderstood rationalist model. And here I am, grasping at hope by seizing on half of her version, and throwing out the rest. *Metaphors mutating and hybridizing, all over again...*

I walk over to Maria, crouch down and bend to kiss her, gently, upside-down on the forehead. She doesn't even stir.

Then I lift my pack and set off down the freeway, believing for a moment that I can feel the emptiness beyond the city reach through, reach over, all the obstacles ahead, and claim me.

Greg Egan not only gained first place in *Interzone's* 1991 popularity poll, with "The Infinite Assassin" (issue 48), but, for the second year running, he has two stories in Gardner Dozois's anthology *The Year's Best Science Fiction* – they are "Blood Sisters" (from IZ 44) and "The Moat" (from the Australian small-press magazine *Aurealis*). His first novel, *Quarantine*, is due out soon from Century/Legend. He lives in Perth, Australia.

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We must enter dragon country, the valley of the shadow of the world of the makers, *After Silence* by Jonathan Carroll (Macdonald, £14.99), badlands. If we are sufficiently enamoured by the game of art to read the book with care, and there is little point in reading Jonathan Carroll just for the fun he seems to promise, we will not shut the last page unscathed into the silence it leaves. Like all of Carroll's tales to date in the untitled quintet which comprises his central accomplishment (reviews of early volumes have appeared in *Interzones* 23, 30, 32 and 51), *After Silence* is a moral fable partly about the cost of being a maker, but far more hurtlingly it is about the fee makers charge the world for submitting to the obscene intimacy of the act of art. It is about pain, and it gives pain.

Like the protagonists of all the previous instalments of the quintet – the earlier volumes are *Bones of the Moon* (1987), *Sleeping in Flame* (1988), *A Child Across the Sky* (1989) and *Outside the Dog Museum* (1991); and in the absence of an overall designation for all five I think, for the purposes of a short review, I'll give them a name: the **Answered Prayers Quintet**, perhaps – the figure who narrates *After Silence* is a shaper. Max Fischer has been drawing cartoons from early childhood, and like most Carroll protagonists has seemed to achieve success without having to undergo any undue stress, as though the great world outside his childhood were no more than an extension of his family, no more than a continued *tabula rasa* upon which he has invisibly earned an entitlement to make his mark. By the end of the novel, his "Paper Clip," a daily comic strip, is being syndicated to more than 300 newspapers, and he is a celebrity. But Fischer hardly seems to notice what must amount by his early 40s to a very considerable fortune, as though he does not need the immunity wealth brings. For Fischer, it is not that the world owes him a living; it's more that the world is *indistinguishable* from his living.

(It might be noted that Carroll himself sometimes seems not to notice the drag coefficient of the world, either, so that when a crisis occurs he has not adequately stocked his protagonist with arms and devices to deal with the obtuseness of things. When that protagonist is a rich man like Fischer – a man any normal book would invest with the world-transforming obstacle-dissolving glamour of wealth – this absence becomes very noticeable. At the climax of the tale, Fischer therefore finds the job of tracing his son's flight – by scheduled airline, just a few hours earlier, across America from California to New Jersey – just as difficult as any of us would. But no rich man who has used detective agencies for decades

could fail *instinctively* to instruct one of them to arrange to have his son tracked from the New Jersey airport he's not yet even landed at, on that already identified flight; and furthermore to arrange for his son's targets somehow to be protected from the family-romance blow-out the lad has just experienced.)

Whatever. By the time the novel begins, Fischer has been riding this dream-life for years, a life he has managed to keep under wraps. Like other Carroll protagonists, in other words, he is a sleepwalker who owns the pavement. Or so it seems. Then he meets Lily Aaron and her son Lincoln at a show where one of his own cartoons has been hung. As a gesture to the woman, whose complex tangy alert presence he finds immediately captivating, and to the child, who seems to share her exuberant clarity of being, he draws a cartoon on Lincoln's teeshirt with a black marking pen: already (in other words) he has begun to transform the child into a palimpsest, a vector of his gift.

Lily turns out to be the manager of a restaurant named *Crowds and Power*. This is a typical power-twee Los Angeles name, of course; but it is also the title of Elias Canetti's famous 1960 study of the metaphysics of control, and any proper study of Carroll (who will, in due course, like every writer of stature, be murdered by the dissecting eye of critic beholders, regardless of the cunning reticences of his public life, the quip hints of interstices beyond our grasp: so be warned, Mr Carroll: you're next) must necessarily dice his oeuvre through this great and metaphor-choked arraignment of the men of the century. This is Canetti, almost at random: "It is difficult to resist the suspicion that behind paranoia, as behind all power, lies the same profound urge: the desire to get other men out of the way so as to be the only one." Also: "People save 'for the sake of the children' and allow others to starve. What they are really doing is keeping everything for themselves." Ecce Fischer.

His first impulse, on meeting a woman with whom he has become enamoured, is to hire a detective agency to check up on her, to serve as poison taster for the king. The "family" is soon established, and he soon begins to describe their lives together in a

Makers' Dice

John Clute

porcelain-glaze prose which gives some of the scenes depicted something of the frightening burnish of a frieze. It is also the case, however, that the life so limned is in fact a life which seems to bristle with rightness (rightness of touch, perhaps) and energy. If *After Silence* is in some ways stronger than any previous Carroll novel, and if it seems the most inherently poignant representation of the curse attendant upon Answered Prayers, it is because the family here depicted does express like mother's milk a genuine human glamour, because Lily Aaron is an astonishingly attractive person, because Lincoln is a beautiful and normal child (even though we soon begin to fear that he has been normalized by the power of the maker). So it is a shock when it all begins to be killed.

We do not know for certain what kind of death will soon be presented for us to remember in our dreams of reading; but we know that some life must snap, we know that Fischer will not be able to fend off any violation from outside of the life story he's telling himself. Beset as he is by interpretive frenzies which now and then take him to one of his detective agencies, Fischer needs only a seed, a hangnail, an incipit, to become a monster, a modernized version of the protagonist of Henry James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901), the century's first and still its most extreme apotheosis of the terrible power of art to shape movements and shadows and absences and glints into golem apes of humans acting. James's protagonist, who also argues his case to the ideal reader in a voice of the intensest plausibility, is Fischer with gloves on. "I found, on my side," he says of the woman around whom he has constructed a cloying artifice of "observation," "a rare intellectual joy, the oddest secret exultation, in feeling her begin instantly to play the part I had attributed to her in the irreducible drama." In the end (as for Fischer) it turns to silence.

The silence begins with Lily's odd behaviour after Lincoln has been knocked out by a baseball and taken to the local hospital for treatment; her paranoia about giving the hospital any factual information triggers one of Fischer's bouts of interpretation, and he hires a detective to ransack her life, just as he has almost immediately ransacked her apartment in search of

clues. What he discovers is that Lily's entire past seems to have been fabricated (an act of *lèse majesté*, indeed one that hints of regicide, in Fischer's Crowds-and-Power world), and that a bleak mystery seems to surround her child. The mystery is soon "solved" by Fischer. Years before (it seems), Lily had kidnapped the infant child from a New Jersey family named Meier. What should be done? (Do we believe Fischer's decipherment of the clues?) Any life between Fischer and Lily from now on, whether or not they share in each other's knowledge, will be an artefact, a porcelain glaze of family romance against the abyss. And so it proves. Lily eventually begins a confession, which Fischer continues for her, and they agree to believe what the two of them (or rather Fischer) have together agreed (but the plot is by no means unwound) will henceforth be the truth of the matter. In order to seal their lives into shape, they bury this agreed past, they relegate the grieving parents in New Jersey to aeons of further grief. They marry. Years pass.

But there is one additional gloss, which brings the novel into knives'-reach of the supernatural, and justifies this review in *Interzone* (beyond the fact that we would be fools not to notice Carroll because he "failed" to obey a genre precept). Fischer has been praying for a life capable of bearing the charges he levies, and at the moment of crisis he finds an answer to this prayer. He "realizes" that he and Lincoln are the same person, that they are the same soul in different bodies. This "realization," the sort of cheap and obscene plot uplift we can all find in the typical contemporary fantasy, both serves as the final sealant in Fischer's construction of a life of art (which is a golem life), and as the final straw which breaks Lincoln, when the plot begins to cut the tale into shreds, when the sacred fount dries, when supernatural events occur (or do not) but save nothing, and there is silence.

And the review ends. I do not wish at this point to try to grasp entire the Answered Prayers Quintet, which may in any case, given the fact Carroll has never been clear about its compass, not have begun to end; it is not yet time, in other words, to lay soiled golem critic hands upon the whole work. Let one merely say that Carroll's failings are as evident here as elsewhere, and as unimportant to the whole. There is the surface of telling which sometimes alienates through an excess of device; the air of insistent ease that protests too much, that forces one at times to think there can be no such thing as a reliable narrator in any Carroll tale; the already notorious difficulty with endings (but here exploited with real success). So what. In the end, Carroll speaks to us about what we are, in language clearer and more dangerous than

we sometimes dare to admit, language that strips bare the mithridatic tolerance we establish, as readers, for the deaths art deals. In *After Silence*, a numen glows. Out of the dark teratogenous fount of art comes, at times, in books like this, the cutting flame we long for, when we read for the sake of our lives.

After silence, a sound of knitting. Charles Sheffield's *Cold as Ice* (Tor Books, \$19.95) is a hard-sf novel set on Earth and throughout the solar system in 2092 AD (but by now we should really be saying 2092 Common Era, which shortens to CE) and it is full of the sound of the worlds outside the self. It is a bright, gainfully employed, excellently constructed, exterior tale of system-wide politics, scientific breakthrough, plot and counterplot. There is a 20-year-old mystery, dating from the end of the intra-system war which decimated Earth's population and savaged the asteroids and the Jovian hegemonies. This mystery relates to a genetic engineering conspiracy which may have given birth to a bunch of homo superiors, a possibility Sheffield allows us to confirm way before any character in the book has much of a clue, so that a genuine sense of wonder (see this reviewer's comments in *Interzone* 50 to the effect that the sense of wonder in sf is in fact a form of dramatic irony) permeates the telling. All comes right in the end, and the book knits smartly to a stop: pure chain-mail.

But Sheffield is not just a pretty face.

The world he gives us, here and in many of his earlier books, may be debugged of the running-dog subjectivisms of a Jonathan Carroll, and may seem terribly empty of souls in consequence; but it seems utterly clear that this is a deliberate stripping of the decks, and that Sheffield knows very well indeed just what sort of tale it is he's writing. *Cold as Ice* is a world fable, and a joy to read. The protagonists it contains – there are a lot of them, all neatly mission-controlled, packaged, labelled, pre-paid, cost-effective – have been given strict instructions to serve the world of the book, and do so. They have no brief to mesmerize that world with the megaphone diktats of the human soul at full blare, and do not. As readers, therefore, we have nothing between us and the dream of the fable but the way it is told, and *Cold as Ice* is almost invisible in the telling, like a window. Unlike almost every hard-sf writer now alive (for Asimov is dead) and working, Sheffield writes in clear. There is no poison in the pen. The world thrives.

Note. I had thought it might be rompish good fun to delve into the *Star Wars* sharecrop, see if that nice Timothy Zahn enjoyed picking cotton, and

began to look at *Star Wars #1: Heir to the Empire* (1991) and *Star Wars #2: Dark Force Rising* (Bantam Books, \$18.50), first printing 250,000 hardbacks, moolah galore you kinda guess. But there was no fun going, no risk, no fling. The book was dinky, oafish, dimply, numb, diseased and cheap. It was not a tale which is told. It was a tale which relieves itself.

So I decided not to eat any more.

(John Clute)

A Commerce of Ideas Paul J. McAuley

Let's get this straight from the start. *Murasaki* (Bantam Spectra, \$20) is not, as its publisher claims on the dust jacket, a novel in six parts. *Murasaki* is not a novel at all. Instead, as Robert Silverberg, who co-edited it with the ubiquitous Martin H. Greenberg, points out in his introduction, it is a shared-world anthology. It is a collection of six hard sf short stories about twin alien worlds and their inhabitants, which each pick up the narrative ball and run with it as their authors see fit, within parameters set by Poul Anderson (who designed the worlds and their biology), Frederik Pohl (who designed the future history and the sociology of the human and alien societies) and Silverberg himself, who sketched, as he puts it, the fundamental narrative structure.

Now shared-world narratives aren't unique to sf. Any long-running TV serial or soap opera, from *Twin Peaks* to *Dynasty*, is precisely that; and ghosted or semi-ghosted sequels to successful novels or series of novels are shared-world narratives too. What's interesting about the best sf and fantasy shared-world anthologies is that within defined parameters the contributors can take the key ideas and turn them into something unexpected, and are able to advance the plot not in a straight line, but with the jive and jostle of a basketball team hustling the ball towards the hoop. For the writers are not moving within a landscape of characters and their conflicts, as in soap opera, but in the purer realm of idea, and ideas are not important in themselves (when they are merely notions), but for what is made of them.

So: *Murasaki* is very definitely a commercial construction, aimed at those stone sf junkies who'll appreciate – and understand – its trope saturation. In its construction, Silverberg deliberately invokes the ghost of Harlan Ellison's successful *Medea* anthology (another exploration of an alien world and its inhabitants by diverse hands, in which Silverberg was

involved), and also restricts his crew to winners of the Nebula Award. But does it work as a narrative structure?

The scenario is that classic sf premise – contact with aliens and the need to comprehend the way in which they live in their world, which comprehension is a mirror in which our own way of living is distortingly reflected. The world – worlds – is a double planetary system of Genji and Chujo orbiting a red dwarf star, the eponymous Murasaki. On Genji, a species of sapient aliens lives on the land on one side of the planet, and on the other, a second species lives on the shore of a great ocean when juvenile, and in the ocean when adult (and possibly non-sentient). On Chujo, which is smaller and colder and drier, a species of nomads perpetually roam, and there are ruins of a lost civilization. It is the interrelationship between the three types of alien, and the meaning of the fall of the lost civilization, that the Japanese and American colonists must riddle to understand the worlds in which they must now make their home.

Now this is by no means an original plot (and indeed with its red dwarf star is one that is particularly familiar to your reviewer), but most hard sf advances not by abrupt paradigm shifts but by modulation of existing notions. And so here. The stories take us from the first explorations and a confused encounter with the aliens of Chujo, in which a crewman dying from radiation-induced leukemia is transformed (Frederik Pohl), through the deepening of the mystery of interrelationships of the three species (David Brin, Poul Anderson and Gregory Benford), to a religious crisis (Greg Bear) and the final epiphanic resolution (Nancy Kress). Despite the very different agendas of the various participants (most noticeably Brin's ecological concerns, detailed with a fine urgency), and despite the lack of a common subtext (which is to say, of a cohesive system of assumed signs and values, which as much as the narrative hold together the text of a novel), so that these stories are at best fragments of a whole, there is a sense of narrative propulsion, of a mystery ripening towards resolution. In that, *Murasaki*, although it is by no means as ground-breaking as Silverberg professes, transcends its commercial conception.

But it is also something more: a hard sf thought experiment in the classical mode with the scaffolding showing, for the essays in which Anderson and Pohl describe the worldbuilding are appended; a detailed outline of the playground in which Anderson, Bear, Benford, Brin, Kress and Pohl have coloured in their segments in their own particular styles, according to their

own particular preoccupations. Because of that, it is a very useful primer for any fledgling hard sf writer, and may find its ultimate niche not on the bestseller lists, but on the reference lists of sf courses alongside Silverberg's own *Worlds of Wonder*.

Thomas F. Monteleone's **The Blood of the Lamb** (Tor, \$22.95) is indisputably a novel, a horror novel in fact, but it gives off the odour of something that is not a finished product but is merely a developmental stage of something else – the final instar being a Hollywood movie. Its story is simple. A Catholic priest in New York suddenly finds that he can perform miracles, the first of which is the incineration by lightning of a drug-crazed mugger, is given publicity by a young ambitious woman reporter, and becomes the centre of a New Age Millennialist movement. But is he really a clone derived from bloodstains left by Jesus Christ on the Turin Shroud (which leads to a long tangled explanation that, gee, of course the Shroud is a fake, but it was once in contact with the real thing) or is he the AntiChrist who will usher in the apocalypse?

Well, reader, given that his miracles mostly consist of loosing blue lightning bolts and generating personal force-fields rather than turning water into wine or multiplying loaves and fishes (although he does heal the mutilations of his best friend, who has been graphically tortured), and given that he beds the willing reporter with hardly a qualm, it isn't that hard to decide. And given that although this a novel in which the nature of the Godhead is crucial to the plot, and which is largely populated by clerics, there's virtually no theological debate, and given that the thunderbolt-wielding priest is depicted as being (a) a handsome stud and (b) as being hot and bothered by sex as any thirteen year old, I suggest you skip the book and wait for the movie. There are a handful of good set-pieces (in the best of which a kind of New Age Woodstock is depicted with a nice irony), but any competent scriptwriter would copy them whole into his screenplay. And with Tom Hanks as the lightning-bolt wielding priest, Emilio Estevez as his Jesuit buddy, Rosanna Arquette as the reporter, Robbie Coltrane as the scheming Cardinal and James Woods as the Vatican Assassin, we can more willingly suspend our disbelief.

No, if it's horror you want, and you're into the sex and drugs and blood and guts and rock'n'roll ethos of splatterpunk, then David Schow's **The Shaft** (Futura, £4.50) is very definitely your cup of tainted meat. Schow is one of the best of the new wave of hard-edge horror writers who utilize the real everyday horrors of the moronic inferno

of American urban streetlife to charge up their monster-on-the-loose tales.

Here, the monster is an apartment building in downtown Chicago, where something lives at the bottom of the airshaft, foul gloop erupts from the plumbing, a cat daintily walks through walls, leaving bloody footprints, and tenants vanish one by one and reappear as patchwork revenants to menace the survivors. Tangled up in this Boschian Burlesque are a drug dealer on the run, your standard stunningly beautiful and intelligent whore with a heart of gold, also on the run, and an innocent on the rebound from a failed relationship.

The Shaft is very definitely not subtle – it's not supposed to be – but it's charged up with an electrifying intensity and a gritty realism that, leavened with cynical, world-weary black humour, jolts new life into old bones. This time the movie probably won't be better than the book.

Nancy A. Collins's **In The Blood** (New English Library, £4.99) is Ying to Schow's Yang. It's her third novel, and features the same vampire heroine as her successful *Sunglasses After Dark*. The heroine is Sonya Blue, who didn't die in the process of conversion from human to vampire, and so is the only person who can thwart the plans of her vampire "father" to create a new master race. She's helped by Palmer, a private eye who becomes her catspaw, and who gradually learns just how attractive the vampire lifestyle can be. After all, who wouldn't want to live for ever, stay forever young, gain psychic powers, and not have to go through the tacky process of becoming one of the undead first?

Sonya Blue is the book's strongest point, a kind of feminist power fantasy who can act tough but stay glamorous, handle impossible situations and control men with her mind – "I could keep you like this for hours. Days, if I so choose. Of course, your bladder and testicles would rupture long before then. And even if you escaped being killed by your own sperm and piss... you'll be impotent for life," she tells Palmer, after he gets a little out of line and she wills an erection on him. Collins has a lot of fun with the clichés of the vampire novel, too, but in the end, overloaded with ghosts and psychic powers and werewolves and Chinese werewolves who are also inscrutable herbalists and ogres and pyrotics and mad scientists and demon babies and succubi, the whole structure is stamped flat by whimsy.

For if anything can happen at any turn of the plot, which in this case it usually does, then it doesn't matter what happens at the end. Although there's much that's fast and sassy and fun (did I mention the tobacco demons which sit on the shoulder of every

cigarette junkie?), *In the Blood* is, as the most clichéd character of all, the ghost of a Brit rocker, would say (and I swear I'm not exaggerating), "A right bleedin' mess. Cool! 'N no mistake!"

James P. Blaylock's *Lord Kelvin's Machine* (Arkham House, \$19.95; illustrated by J.K. Potter's wonderful photorealistic montages) is also a sequel, in this case to his Philip K. Dick Award-winning steampunk extravaganza *Homunculus*. And the tripartite tale of *Lord Kelvin's Machine* is every bit as good, each part revolving around the plots of the evil Ignacio Narbondo, who murders the wife of the gentleman scientist, Langdon St. Ives, in the opening pages, and the electromagnetic accumulator invented by Lord Kelvin to thwart Narbondo's plan to draw a comet down upon the Earth.

Narbondo plunges to his doom in an Arctic tarn at the end of the first tale, but revival of his corpse is the centre of not one but two opposing schemes; and Lord Kelvin's device is stolen and used to sink ships and so hold the British government to ransom, and then forms the heart of a time-machine with which St. Ives plans his ultimate revenge on Narbondo.

Each tale is jigsawed together from a dozen conceits which fit so perfectly that to try and tease out every strand shatters the whole irretrievably; Blaylock is an absurdist (as distinct from absurd) fantasist whose tales are resonant with a fine nostalgia for a Victorian London that never was, a lost era of moral certainty and infernal devices where marching Peruvians and a Rawls-Hibbing Mechanical Bladder can detonate volcanoes and tip the Earth's orbit, and where deriding-do can always (in the end) win the day. Recommended.

Sometimes, the first have to be last, but not necessarily the least. *And Disregards the Rest* (Gollancz, £14.99) is Australian writer Paul Voermans's first novel, vigorous and confident, and richly authentic despite a plot Philip K. Dick would have blushed to use.

It works backwards towards the unravelling of precisely what happened when an experimental production of *The Tempest*, staged in the Australian bush, was overwhelmed by a flash flood during dress rehearsal. Eleven years later, Kevin Gore, one of the few survivors of the cast and crew, is hearing voices and finds that his blood has turned blue, which may have something to do with strange visions experienced by people across the world, or which may be because he's going as crazy as his friend Martin Leywood, another survivor who is now in a mental hospital. Crazy soon becomes relative, as the novel alternates between passages from Leywood's

unpublished account of the affair and Kevin's attempts to find the truth, and interleaves detailed realism of accounts of the working of avant-garde theatrical productions and the vibrant otherness of the bush that surrounds Australian suburban civilization with a centrifugal plot held together only by the force of Voermans's writing.

The tangled sci-fi resolution, involving UFOs and alien telepathy and alternate worlds, almost but not quite dissolves into an illogical mishmash, but the saving grace is the care Voermans takes over his cast of characters. When we finally reach back to the flood, it is both powerfully strange and apocalyptic and elegiac, and despite the silly resolution, which by their own momentum the characters transcend to achieve a peace of their own, *And Disregards the Rest* is the debut of a powerful and distinctive new voice.

(Paul J. McAuley)

Divine Right of Kings Wendy Bradley

"The nature of kingship" is one of those old philosophical questions you don't hear much about these days, possibly on account of its being about as relevant as the angels on the pinhead. Practical power devolving by the whims of heredity is something you come across almost exclusively in fantasy novels, where it has the obvious benefits of simplifying your plot, concentrating your major characters and sketching in your system of government in the first casual scattering of titles.

Kingship is the philosophical point rather than idle shorthand in *The Dragon Token* (Daw, \$20), Melanie Rawn's latest episode in the "what are we going to do now Rohan is dead?" saga. Rawn has set up the situation as a conflict about the nature of kingship, killing off her attractive hero Rohan and leaving his kin and country to cope with an invasion without him. His son Pol is trying and so far failing to be the kind of king his father was, and a very few others have realized that, in the circumstances in which they find themselves, a Rohan-like king isn't necessarily what is needed.

The philosophical conceit might be interesting if it were explored in more depth, but this is really only a middle-third-of-trilogy piece, in which Pol has a bad attack of the Hamlets, Sioned seeks consolation in the bottom of a bottle, Andry spends much of his time wandering around wearing someone else's face and Meggy wanders around the desert with a large metaphorical

neon sign saying POL'S WIFE — PLEASE KIDNAP. And we still haven't the faintest idea what the Bad Guys from Over the Sea want, and I still had to consult the index of characters every thirty pages. The trouble with this sort of stuff is that if it's even only halfway decently written it's utterly addictive. This is more than halfway decent — volume three right now please.

Margaret Weis's solo space opera comes to a conclusion in *King's Sacrifice* (Bantam, £4.99) in which she also considers the nature of kingship. Dion, last survivor of the Blood Royal aside from his guardians Maigrey and the ambivalent Sagan, lives to scoop the prizes and move back to the Glitter Palace along with a lot of cameramen and footmen straight out of the last episode of *Cinderella* crossed with *JFK*. Although armed with literally genetically superior Blood Royal, Dion gets to do very little except stand around and look pretty a lot while the characters grandstand at each other. This is addictive but cack-handed stuff: Dion is ambushed by being presented with a gaggle of walking wounded looking to him for miracle cures while he is being broadcast to the galaxy: the fiendish plot is to make him look callous if he ignores them or like a jerk if he attempts a miraculous healing and fails. The idea that he could attempt a miracle and succeed is dismissed but the idea which instantly springs to the reader's mind is why on earth (or any other lookalike planet) should there be all these halt and lame and deaf and blind in a galaxy where there are genetically engineered viruses and cyborgs on every street corner. Well OK, but Weis then draws attention to the ineptitude by having Sagan point out to Dion that he could have just given them all the name of a good plastic surgeon. *Puh-lease!*

I was particularly offended by the presence of the infodump character, Brother Miguel, whom Brother Fideles finds hiding in the walls of the abbey after all the inhabitants have been zombified. Miguel explains to Fideles how it happened, warns him the whole place is a trap — and then Fideles goes off to rescue Sagan and make his escape leaving Miguel where he was! If you can't handle one little old redundant character (have him tag along gratefully as far as the shuttle and then get heroically shot shielding Fideles from a stray bullet, springs to mind without even having to think about it), then in my view one shouldn't be attempting a multi-planet mega-saga at all. However it's done now and it's not that bad. Mostly.

Plainsong by Deborah Grabien (Pan, £4.50) is a sort of girly *Siddhartha* which ups the ante from kingship to godhead. Basically it's a New Age

fantasy where all the nasty old grown-ups are dead apart from a few magi and the Mother. All the children survive to cook fruit pies and commune telepathically with animals until the Child is born. It turns out that yer godhead is only rented out temporarily, see, and so the Son has had his couple of millennia and has to push off for the wheel to turn and the, er, Daughter to take over so that everything can be nice and groovy. You will gather I enjoyed it rather more than I expected, which isn't saying a whole lot. However I highly recommend bookshop browsers to read the prologue—it's only half a page and it's a damn good joke.

In *Damia* (Bantam, £13.99) Anne McCaffrey does another Rowan—i.e. takes one of her best short stories and picks it apart so that both the plot and character unravel. People with honourable bit parts in the short stagger under a crushing load of inconsistent characterization in the long version. However at least she has cut her most offensive line of all, the one about physical domination being the essence of sexual attraction.

Finally, Dean R. Koontz is on top form in *Hideaway* (Headline, £14.99) when he has his hero, Hatch Harrison, rescued from a car crash into a freezing river and resuscitated after a world-record-beating time dead. After that Hatch finds he has developed some weird psychic link with a psychotic killer who posés his victims before, during and after their murders in blasphemous worship around the old demon statue in the abandoned fairground. Don't Americans think to clear out abandoned fairgrounds routinely for manic satanists and other clichés? Ah well, Hatch and his splendidly realized wife Lindsay nevertheless manage to rescue their adopted daughter in the usual grandstand climax. Koontz's strength is that his characters are just like us: they have read the books and seen the movies, so that at the end Hatch and Lindsay not only go chasing after the bad guy armed with a crucifix but they remember to take a gun and torch each and to call the cops on the car phone on the way.

(Wendy Bradley)

Discovering Charles de Lint Ken Brown

Let's get the sf over with first. *Short Blade* by Peter R. Emshwiller (Bantam, \$4.99) requires me to make a confession. I'm sure all reviewers come across a book that they just find impossible to read. This is one of those. So I am unqualified to comment on it.

Venus Rising by Carol Emshwiller (Peter R.'s mother, I believe) is a 36-page small-press publication from Edgewood Press, (PO Box 264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA; \$5). It's set in a mythical past loosely based on prehistory as described by Elaine Morgan (for those who've not read *The Descent of Woman*, the idea is that the immediate ancestors of the modern human species lived a partly aquatic life, hence our relative hairlessness, subcutaneous fat and near-webbed fingers). It is an account of the ravishing of a woman of the relaxed, lazy, maternal beach people by a man from the tree people. He is a bureaucratic, paternal, violent, officious, self-important little prick (literally) and the whole thing is an obvious feminist fable. I liked it.

Dark Matter by Garfield Reeves-Stevens (Pan, £4.99) is another serial-killer book. Someone associated with a team of quantum physicists is committing particularly gruesome murders by trepanning conscious victims and fondling their brains—it's all described in great detail in the first chapter in enough detail to have put me off reading the rest if I hadn't been about to review it. The book is sold as sf but there is a police procedural inside trying to get out. The science (mostly quantum physics) is well enough done but not really central to the plot, except for the deus-ex-machina ending, which I could have done without. The depiction of the scientists, especially the central genius, seems shallow and unpersuasive: I preferred Kate Duvall, the politically correct black detective with a mess of a personal life who is trying to piece together the background to the killings. She has the makings of a good character. Were I the editor I would have tried to cut the first 12 pages and most of the last hundred and promote it as a thriller.

The Silent Warrior by L.E. Modesitt, Jr (Tor, \$3.99), Volume 2 of "The Forever Hero" and sequel to *Dawn for a Distant Earth*, could almost have been titled "Pale Green Lensman and Empire." MacGregor Gerswin, removed from his post on devastated Earth, is given a pre-retirement command on a dead-end maintenance base. Naturally he upgrades it to a first-class shipyard, fathers a few children, and starts a revolution or two, all the while meddling in the affairs of the Admiralty and the Assassins Guild through a vast trust fund and a secretive research foundation in order to influence the inevitable fall of the Empire. Yes, readers, this is Space Opera.

It's all good fun, but I have a few quibbles. First, this volume goes no further than the previous one towards describing (never mind explaining) the political and ecological disasters that are supposed to have destroyed

old Earth and to be about to destroy the new Empire. Also it all seems rather odd that both the inexorable workings of the dead hand of History, and the last hope of democracy, personal freedom, and a productive economy, depend on a secretive and immensely rich superhero. Sort of Batman joins the anarcho-syndicalists. And we still haven't cleared up the problem of the impenetrable fortress.

Polar City Blues by Katharine Kerr (Grafton, £3.99) is also fun. Yet more murders, this time of alien diplomats on the (mostly) human planet Hagar. The police telepath on the scene is shocked into near-catatonia and his friends and relations run around looking under the stones of a civilization that is more-or-less a punky California in space. It's all written in the present tense, which takes a few pages to get used to but helps build a feeling of tension and speed. The protagonist, a retired space-pilot and information broker, just happens to have a friend with the fastest space ship in the system, access to the best-developed AI on the planet and turns out to be the sister of the local crime boss as well. I suppose if these people were ordinary the book wouldn't be about them.

There's a nifty appendix that tells you all about baseball. I can't say whether it's any good or not because I know hardly anything about baseball. It is helpful when reading Stephen Jay Gould though.

When I read *The World at the End of Time* by Frederik Pohl (Grafton, £4.99) I decided to start the review with "they don't write that any more." But from the previous two books it's obvious that they do. Old-fashioned space opera is alive and well and published in New York and London. A lot of it depends on the scale of the action—space is notoriously very, very big and forever is a long long time. *The World at the End of Time* takes rather more than 10 to the 40 years of the stuff, following the careers of two very different characters. One is a vast and cruel energy being who lives inside stars (when it can find them) and doesn't really believe that slimy, horrid, sticky matter could support life. The other is a human who survives that long through all the normal sf methods: freezer compartments in colony ships, time dilation in both directions due to both space travel and absurd gravitational potentials, getting caught up in a tiny (about ten light years across) outpouching of the universe in which time flows differently, being set adrift in a small wrecked spaceship and freezing himself again, falling foul of religious fanatics and being frozen yet again for his crimes, some serious genetic engineering...you get the picture.

This is a Good Read. If you don't

know the Hertzprung Russell diagram when you start reading it, you will when you finish. And if the ability of the puny humans to out-think and out-last the most powerful, knowledgeable and intelligent beings in the universe makes a nonsense of the plot, that is no more than we have been trained to expect by the past fifty years of this sort of stuff. I probably had more fun with it than with any of the other books reviewed here.

Now to fantasy. **Suisan** by Phyllis Carol Agins (Baen, \$4.99) is not a good start. An attempt at a rewriting of "Snow White," with a lot of rather purple prose, a little sordid sex and a few weird ideas about the mystic properties of minerals and the reproductive habits of Dwarves, it is a near-turkey. And why oh why does the dwarf with the gift of prophecy have to be called Dylan?

Darker Than the Storm by Freda Warrington (NEL, £4.99) is another piece of green pleading, this time embedded in a sword-and-sorcery hack-fest. Ashurek of Gorethria is an exiled warrior lord with a dubious past who seems to have taken some vow not to use his sword again (it can't be a very strict vow because he had disposed of a spiderlike monster, a thief and something like half a dozen city guards before I lost count). He is cast out from the School of Sorcery on Ikonus for illicitly opening a Way between Worlds and fetches up in Jhensit, a world riven by civil and religious strife. The ruling classes have turned their backs on growing things and the soil (gardening is illegal, indeed blasphemous) and all the electric power for the city comes from a suggestive White Dome, which also serves as a prison.

Jhensit is the victim of a terrible disaster, the planet itself is breaking up, losing parts of itself to an extra-dimensional chaos. The reason for this is bound up in some way with the situation back on Ikonus. The story holds together better than many of its kind — clues to the nature of the catastrophe are scattered throughout almost in the manner of a detective story. And yes, there is a serial killer. Not literature, but one for a decent train journey.

In **Dragon Season** by Michael Cassutt (Tor, \$4.99) Richard Walsh, a US airforce officer, returns from a long tour of duty to find that his girlfriend has disappeared leaving a new-born baby. It is a straightforward alternate-world, well-written, with few plot surprises. The description of military life has a ring of truth about it, appearing to me to be more realistic than the typical macho fantasies of the average pot-boiler. Cassutt's airforce is more like IBM than the SAS. Of course, the only US airforce officers I have ever talked to about their work were on an IBM

system programming course at the time so I can't exactly claim to be an expert.

Yarrow by Charles de Lint (Pan, £7.99) is the story of Caitlin Midhir, a Canadian fantasy writer who gets her wacky ideas from dreams. One day the dreams cease. At the same time the police are investigating yet another series of rather gruesome murders of more-or-less unattractive people. Of course, as this is a fantasy, it turns out that the murderer is a sort of mind vampire who has been stealing her dreams. Well, it's a wonderful excuse for writer's block.

Spiritwalk (Tor, \$19.95), also by Charles de Lint, is a sequel to the 1984 book *Moonheart* (still available from Pan in the UK). I was sufficiently impressed by the first few pages to go out and look for a copy of the older book.

Just in passing, has anyone else noticed an improvement in the fiction kept by W.H. Smith's? I failed to find *Moonheart* in three well-known bookshops around the Charing Cross Road and came across it almost by accident in the Lewisham branch of Smith's. More impressively, they now have a "twentieth-century fiction" section (roughly: Booker-nominees, as-seen-on-the-BBC, South Americans and just plain novels) which is a big improvement on the genre-and-Penguin displays they ran until a few months ago.

Both *Moonheart* and *Spiritwalk* are set in and around a vast, unlikely house in Ottawa which is (how did we all guess?) one of those places where the walls round our world are thin. In *Moonheart* the house itself defends its occupants from a magical assault while the police and some monsters from Beyond besiege it. *Spiritwalk* consists of four short pieces which establish the background of Tamson House and a novella, "Ghostwood," which, like *Moonheart*, is essentially an adventure story set in many worlds, with a diverse cast of characters flitting in and out of the fields we know trying to get the house back from the evil spirit that is attempting to displace the Guardian of the house.

All three of the de Lint books, despite superficially different plots, share the same structure. Someone is in danger from enemies who turn out to be magical. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police get involved. A large cast of characters is brought on stage. Most of them can't quite believe what is happening. Someone goes into an Otherworld (they seem to be about equally populated by Ojibway shamans and ancient Welsh druids), from which they return with magical help of some sort, just in time for everyone to turn up at the same spot for the dramatic denouement, usually involving a noble act of self-sacrifice. I love

them and find them reading-with-a-torch-under-the-covers material.

A word of warning about this review — de Lint is one of those writers who likes to fill his work with cultural references, to clothes, motorbikes, sf and music. And they are exactly my cultural references. Everybody who matters in these books either reads sf and fantasy or is a mythical character themselves, and they read books I have read or come from various bits of myth with which I am familiar.

Music is present throughout all three books, mostly folk, but ranging from punk to reggae, mentioning the Clash, Alan Stivell, Robin Williamson, Billy Bragg and others. How many North Americans have even heard of Billy Bragg? If de Lint's taste is a little quieter than mine, maybe even tinged with the dreaded New Age (someone said it was like listening to the fabric conditioner going round your washing machine), well, that's explained by him being on the wrong side of the Atlantic, a few years older than me (I guess) and living in Ottawa of all places.

Ottawa is the heart of the matter. I suspect that Mr de Lint may be one of those people who read *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gormath* as a child and actually looked up the references at the back. (I did, and he either reads all the same books as me or else has a very keen eye for product placement.) He then decided to write fantasies based in his home town. I've never been there (who has?) but by reputation it's a bit like Basingstoke transplanted to the middle of nowhere. As far as I know it became capital of Canada because it was the only town of any size on the Ontario-Quebec border, and it wasn't even called Ottawa to start with but Bytown. They gave it a native American name because it sounded better for a capital. Its major (Quebecois) suburb is called Hull (good French name, that). To make such a place into a Citadel of Faerie shows amazing patriotism, faith, even heroism on Mr de Lint's part.

(Ken Brown)

Deft Borrowings Chris Gilmore

As someone remarks in *Stations of the Tide* by Michael Swanwick (Legend, £7.99), there's no such thing as a new story. In default of that, Swanwick has assembled features from a number of sources and embedded them into the matrix of a psychological detective tale, set on a distant world of the far future. By way of disarming criticism, he mentions in the acknowledgements "riffs lifted from C.L. Moore, Dylan Thomas, Brian Aldiss,

Ted Hughes and Jamaica Kincaid [that] are too blatant to pass unacknowledged." To which I can add in short order Katherine MacLean, Frank Herbert and Lester del Rey. Criticism is disarmed less by his frankness than the exceedingly good job he has made. The story is much like an expansion of Jack Vance's "Moon Moth," but the style and atmosphere belong more to Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. In saying this much, I've said enough for the knowledgeable to rush out and buy it. Only the less clued-in need read on.

The world Miranda once harboured an intelligent race, the haunts, but these have been negligently extinguished by the human colonists, a crime for which no one feels much guilt any more; besides, a few may still exist, passing for human. On the other hand, the colonists feel deep resentment against the developed worlds which have placed Miranda under cultural embargo; only a trickle of hi-tech goodies are allowed, nor is independent invention encouraged. Culture is largely conditioned by the extreme planetary climate, which involves drowning of the lowlands every "Great Year." Native fauna routinely adapt between terrestrial and aquatic forms, and many humans envy them the ability. As they are also imbued with all sorts of sinister superstitions which, in the manner of such books, keep on being validated by events, it's not surprising that the favourite scam of the villain of the piece, Gregorian, is to offer them the means of doing so.

To this world comes an unnamed bureaucrat, trying to prevent Gregorian from importing embargoed technology, though with so little overt means of enforcement that one wonders why anyone bothers to frustrate him. However, he is drugged, beaten up, seduced, kidnapped and conversed with by the natives, not to mention his own associates, at least one of whom, he soon realizes, must be in league with Gregorian. So the book enjoyably progresses through the carnival of grotesques which makes up Mirandan society at the turning of the Year, with occasional forays into the even grotesquer worlds of hi-tech bureaucracy to which the protagonist reports. Neither style nor pace flags, and the climax is surprising and thoroughly satisfying.

With so many engaging touches (I hope not all borrowed) the few false notes are barely worth recording, but one lies in Swanwick's retelling of the story of the Emperor's New Clothes. The embellishments are fair enough, but the story is essentially the same as ever – he doesn't transmute it while leaving it instantly recognizable as Wolfe does. This wouldn't matter anywhere else, but the book reads so like Wolfe that here it sticks out as a shocking failure. Another is when he commits

the common malapropism of aureole for areola. A woman is incomplete without two of the latter, but more than one of the former would be in doubtful taste. All right? Got it now? And don't get them mixed up again – it can really ruin your love scenes. Whaddya mean, you already knew? I said this bit was only for the less clued-in!

(Chris Gilmore)

Wrong About Worms Andy Robertson

There are always problems in reading genre fiction if you have too deep a knowledge of the background, and science fiction is no exception. It's not a matter of sf writers having too bold and brave a vision, but rather that all the cutest ideas turn out to have been disproved decades ago. For example: people do not have "pleasure centres" in their brains. White rats may press the button 12,000 times a day, but human volunteers under electronic stimulation just feel vaguely uncomfortable and itchy. So, in theory, we should say goodbye to tasps, wireheading and current-addiction, and, unfortunately, goodbye to the best metaphor for the pure social phenomenon of addiction that anyone has ever imagined. It just won't happen.

Or take the idea that memory has a chemical basis – that you can learn by eating RNA pills. This was based on an experiment with planarian worms, where they taught worm(1) to negotiate a maze and then fed it to worm(2) and found that worm(2) learned the maze faster. Impressive, until you realize that well-fed worms naturally learn fastest, and planarian worm is the best food for planarian worm. Worm(3) had never been anywhere near the maze, but when they minced it up and fed it to worm(4), then worm(4) learned the maze just as fast as worm(2) had.

Science fiction is full of these ideas – ideas which were borrowed superficially from the sciences, but are actually attractive and persistent because they have roots in the myths of the wider culture. Despite my protest at the start of this review, I don't think this is a bad thing. Far from it. Sf is a literature, not a branch of science, and it quite rightly grabs ideas from all over. That's what sf is about – stretching across the interface between the radically new knowledge the sciences keep revealing, and the myths and parables by which human beings continually simplify and humanize their knowledge. It doesn't matter if sf is inexact, so long as it's lively, and so long as it keeps real input from both sides alive and bubbling.

The first book under review is **Cyberpunk: Outlaws and Hackers on the Computer Frontier** by Katy Haffner and John Markoff (Fourth Estate, £14.99). It is an account of real-life computer hacking, and my meandering introduction is an attempt to link it, however tenuously, with sf. Despite the title and the endorsements by Messrs Gibson & Sterling on the back cover, this is actually rather difficult to do. Very few sf writers have got their technology as badly wrong as the cyberpunks did, and in very few cases can it have mattered as little. The idea of "cyberspace," one of the key cyberpunk images, is a completely inaccurate picture of computer technology: in fact, like the pseudo-scientific ideas I mentioned earlier, "cyberspace" really derives from pre-technological myths – in this case, the idea of the soul or spirit being separable from the body, wandering and adventuring in a supernatural realm, meeting gods and demons. Bad science; non-existent technology; but excellent sf, because it touches on and revivifies a whole stratum of ancient legends, not to mention our own subjective experience when dreaming. And, therefore, it has produced some good books.

But (in case anyone ever imagined different) real computers aren't like that, and real computer hackers aren't like that. Moreover, real computing isn't ever likely to develop in that direction. Good pre-cyberpunk writers like Brunner and Budrys were more accurate in their picture of the technology. At the moment, as everyone who works in it knows, commercial computing is a mess – not even a creative mess, but just a crawling, metastasizing, messy mess, endlessly repatched and retrofitted, torn apart by diverging standards, and stubbornly lacking anything like viable self-organization, let alone the genesis of godlike intelligence. If anything, the mess is getting worse as computers get bigger and faster. Cyberpunk is a pretty good description of the careers of three major hackers – people who have learned to nose out interesting and/or mischief-making scraps of information from this mess – but unsurprisingly the hackers themselves form a more interesting study than the hacking.

I won't go into the book in more detail. It is an excellent bit of journalism, clearly written, and full of relevant technical and personal information, but not too heavy for the non-specialist. I have to confess that I didn't find it very interesting, but then I'm a systems programmer myself and I know too much about the background to be gobsmacked by hearing it all again. If you want to know about the social phenomenon of hacking and you form part of the 0.05% of *Interzone's* readers who are not already

involved in commercial DP, I don't think you could buy a better introduction.

I also have a... well... bookoid entity to review called **Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits** by Andrew Ross (Verso, £10.95). I think there are some cogent ideas in here, but I'm afraid most of the book is so badly written that, to borrow a simile from the sainted Myles, it sounds like dirty water being squirted out of a hole in a burst rubber ball. The Plain Readers of *Interzone* should consider a certain book reviewer that you know and I know: his stuff is a joy at page length, but imagine it two hundred pages long, minus all the wit and some of the brains, and you have about the style of *Strange Weather*.

Trapped in all this is a meditation on public perceptions of science and technology that does have some good bits. The mythos of the future, increasingly apocalyptic, is viewed from several angles: New Ageism, hacking, science fiction, ecodoom. Cyberpunk has a separate chapter all to itself: Ross knows his sf, and is impressed, but the Mirrorshades get told off for being to white and too male – it's that sort of book. There are few conclusions drawn, and any in-depth analyses are in the sort of opaque leftspeak that makes the head go round and round after a couple of super-long sentences. While not exactly a Marxist, or not prepared to admit it, Ross still has the habit of thinking in watertight paradigms that explain everything, and since he is actually (and quite honestly) full of doubts the book is an exercise in stop-go. In one paragraph we may think we are heading towards something definite, but in the next we are off on a tangent again. It's all very confusing.

I can't recommend the book, but I wouldn't want to totally trash it. There's some good stuff here if you dig hard enough, and if Ross only took a course in Plain English he might produce something really worthwhile.

(Andy Robertson)

UK Books Received March 1992

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Asprin, Robert. **M.Y.T.H. Inc. in Action**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-993500-7, 245pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; ninth in the "Myth" series.) 2nd April 1992.

Baer, Freddie. **Ecstatic Incisions: The Col-lages of Freddie Baer**. Preface by Peter Lam-born Wilson. AK Press [3 Balmoral Place, Stirling, Scotland FK8 2RD], ISBN 1-873176-60-0, 74pp, trade paperback, £7.95 [\$11.95 USA]. (Fantasy art book, first edition; Freddie Baer is a contributor to *Interzone* as well as SF Eye and other magazines; we recommend her work highly.) March (?) 1992.

Banks, Iain M. **Use of Weapons**. Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8358-3, 379pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 48.) 26th March 1992.

Cartmel, Andrew. **Cat's Cradle: Warhead**. "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20367-4, 262pp, paperback, £3.50. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition.) 16th April 1992.

Cook, Glen. **The Black Company**. "The First Chronicle of The Black Company." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-016553-3, 319pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1984.) 26th March 1992.

Cook, Hugh. **The Worshippers and the Way**. "Chronicles of an Age of Darkness, Volume 9." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13848-7, 380pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 23rd April 1992.

Dillard, J.M. **Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21660-X, 301pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novelization, first published in the USA, 1992; based on the screenplay by Nicholas Meyer and Denny Martin Flinn.) 26th March 1992.

Donnelly, Joe. **The Shee**. Century, ISBN 0-7126-5022-9, 407pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 2nd April 1992.

Donnelly, Joe. **Stone**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-983110-4, 514pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 46.) 2nd April 1992.

Du Maurier, Daphne. **The Birds and Other Stories**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-986640-4, 237pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense collection, first published as *The Apple Tree*, 1952; later republished under the present title by Pan Books in 1977.) 2nd April 1992.

Du Maurier, Daphne. **The House on the Strand**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-986570-X, 288pp, paperback, £4.99. (Timeslip romance, first published in 1969.) 2nd April 1992.

Evans, Christopher. **Chimeras**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21304-X, 173pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; Evans's first new book in quite some time, it consists of a story cycle, parts of which have appeared in various anthologies and magazines over the past several years.) 9th April 1992.

Farmer, Philip José. **Dayworld Breakup**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21121-7, 366pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; sequel to *Dayworld* and *Dayworld Rebel*.) 26th March 1992.

Feist, Raymond E., and Janny Wurts. **Servant of the Empire**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20381-8, 827pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; sequel to *Daughter of the Empire*; according to the biographical notes on the authors, Janny Wurts is married to the artist Don Maitz, "whose painting adorns the cover of *Servant of the Empire*"; but not on this edition, which in fact has a cover by British artist Geoff Taylor.) 9th April 1992.

Gentle, Mary, and Roz Kaveney, eds. **Villains!** "Midnight Rose Books. Created by Mary Gentle and Neil Gaiman." Penguin/

Roc, ISBN 0-14-014561-3, 337pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first edition; as with the last "Midnight Rose" book, *The Weerde*, Neil Gaiman has a credit on front cover and spine although he's not actually named as an editor on the title page; this volume, the first to appear in the third "braid" of *Midnight Rose's* output, contains original stories by Stephen Baxter, Keith Brooke, Molly Brown, Storm Constantine, David Langford, Alex Stewart, Charles Stross and others; most of these names seem vaguely familiar to us from somewhere...) 26th March 1992.

Gilluly, Sheila. **The Giant of Inishkerry: The Second Book of the Painter**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0503-5, 281pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received.) 9th July 1992.

Grey, Rudolph. **Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.** Feral House [UK & European distribution by Turnaround, 27 Horsfell Rd., London N5 1XL], 231pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Biography of a horror-film director, first edition; Wood is famous as one of the worst movie-makers who ever lived, so we assume this is a camp item strictly for schlock lovers; we may be wrong, though – who knows?) 16th April 1992.

Hart, John. **Jizz: The Story of a New Renaissance Man and the Riddle of Existence**. Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-99487-1, 285pp, paperback, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by an author who lives in Brighton [as does that other funny chap, Robert Rankin – see below].) 23rd April 1992.

Jacobson, Howard. **The Very Model of a Man**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-84338-5, 342pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; by a well-known humorous novelist, this is a Biblical fantasy about Cain, described by its publishers as "a divine dark comedy of the darkest shade.") 30th April 1992.

Kennealy, Patricia. **The Copper Crown: A Book of The Keltiad**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-06831-7, 512pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1984; second in this series about space-going Celts; reviewed by Peter Garratt in *Interzone* 19.) 26th March 1992.

Kerr, Katharine. **A Time of Omens: A Novel of the Westlands**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-13781-9, 354pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition[?]; sequel to *A Time of Exile* in the "Westlands Cycle"; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 1st June 1992.

Kilworth, Garry. **Midnight's Sun: A Story of Wolves**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21495-X, 317pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 43.) 26th March 1992.

Koontz, Dean R. **The Funhouse**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0560-4, 306pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novelization, first published in the USA under the pseudonym "Owen West," 1980; based on a screenplay by Larry Block; proof copy received.) 13th August 1992.

Lawhead, Stephen. **The Paradise War: Song of Albion, Book One**. Lion, ISBN 0-7549-2242-2, 416pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 50.) 27th March 1992.

Le Guin, Ursula. **Searoad: Chronicles of Klatsand**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05277-5, ISBN 0-575-05277-5, 193pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Collection by a major sf/fantasy author; first published in the USA, 1991;

despite its fantasy-sounding title, this is described as a "completely mainstream book," a story-cycle about the lives of women in the Pacific north-west over the past century; parts of the book were first published in the *New Yorker*, the *Missouri Review*, the *Kenyon Review* and other such literary journals, 1987-91.) 2nd April 1992.

Martin, David. **Bring Me Children**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0445-4, 310pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1992; about "a monster of sadistic ingenuity, a physician whose mission to heal has been hideously perverted.") 9th April 1992.

May, Julian. **Jack the Bodiless: Volume 1 of The Milieu Trilogy**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223875-6, 425pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 6th April 1992.

Morris, Mark. **Stitch**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13813-4, 526pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 52.) 19th March 1992.

Rankin, Robert. **The Suburban Book of the Dead. Armageddon III: The Remake**. Bloomsbury, ISBN 0-7475-1165-9, 262pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first edition.) 16th April 1992.

Rankin, Robert. **They Came and Ate Us. Armageddon II: The B-Movie**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13832-0, 336pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 51.) 23rd April 1992.

Rawn, Melanie. **Sunrunner's Fire: Dragon Prince, Book Three**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31752-0, 479pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 10th April 1992.

Rovin, Jeff. **The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Cartoon Animals**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-13-275561-0, 327pp, trade paperback, £13.99. (Directory of cartoon characters, first published in the USA, 1991; copiously illustrated and well informed, though printed on rather sub-standard paper, this is the Prentice-Hall edition of last year with a British price-sticker.) 23rd March 1992.

Shaw, Bob. **Orbitsville Judgement**. MacDonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8362-1, 281pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1990; third in the "Orbitsville" trilogy; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 45.) 26th March 1992.

Sheffield, Charles. **Transcendence: Book Three of The Heritage Universe**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05264-3, 270pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 9th April 1992.

Silverberg, Ira, ed. **Everything is Permitted: The Making of Naked Lunch**. Introductions by William S. Burroughs and David Cronenberg. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21714-2, 128pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Essays on the making of the film *Naked Lunch*, with copious illustrations; first edition.) 26th March 1992.

Silverberg, Robert. **Majipoor Chronicles**. "The second enthralling book in the Majipoor trilogy." Pan, ISBN 0-330-28117-8, 317pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy collection of linked stories, first published in the USA, 1982.) 6th March 1992.

Slade, Darren, and Nigel Watson. **Supernatural Spielberg**. Valis Books [52a Lascotts Rd., Wood Green, London N22 4JN], ISBN 0-9516251-3-6, 136pp, paperback, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy film criticism, first edition; it contains chapters on most of Spielberg's films from *Something Evil* [1972] through to *Always* [1989]; however, there are no chapters on *Duel*, *Jaws*, *The Color*

Purple, *Empire of the Sun* and *Hook* – perhaps none of these were "supernatural" enough for the authors, one of whom has previously written a book on UFOlogy.) April 1992.

Somtow, S.P. **Valentine: Return to Vampire Junction**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05018-7, 383pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; "S.P. Somtow" is a form of his name used by Thai-born author Somtow Sucharitkul.) 9th April 1992.

Somtow, S.P. **Vampire Junction**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05057-8, 362pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1984.) 9th April 1992.

Spiegelman, Art. **Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-013206-6, 136pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Graphic novel, first published in the USA, 1991; sequel to the bestselling 1986 *Maus*, which dealt with Nazi atrocities in animal-fable form; it comes with accolades from Raymond Briggs, Umberto Eco and others.) 26th March 1992.

Stableford, Brian, ed. **The Second Dedalus Book of Decadence: The Black Feast**. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-80-4, 337pp, paperback, £8.99. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; it includes verse and prose by Charles Baudelaire, James Elroy Flecker, Anatole France, J.K. Huysmans, the Comte de Lautreamont, Vernon Lee, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Rimbaud, Algeron Charles Swinburne, Oscar Wilde and many others, much of it newly translated from French by the editor; there's also a 30-page introduction by Stableford; recommended.) 31st March 1992.

Stableford, Brian, ed. **The Dedalus Book of Femmes Fatales: A Collection of Contemporary and Classic Stories**. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-77-4, 288pp, paperback, £7.99. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; the 19th-century reprints include verse and prose by Keats, Baudelaire, Poe, Swinburne and others; the original stories are by Barrington Bayley, Storm Constantine, Robert Irwin, Thomas Ligotti, Ian McDonald, Kim Newman, Brian Stableford, etc; there's also an interesting 25-page introduction by Stableford, and some rather surprising illustrations; recommended.) 19th March 1992.

Stableford, Brian. **The Werewolves of London**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32267-2, 467pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1990; reviewed [glowingly] by John Clute in *Interzone* 43.) 6th March 1992.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **Michael Bishop: A Transfigured Talent – A Working Bibliography**. 3rd edition. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 33." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-32-7, 9+38pp, paperbound, £2. (Author bibliography; the first edition appeared in 1986.) Late entry: February 1992 publication, received in March.

Tuttle, Lisa. **Lost Futures**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21294-9, 210pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received.) 25th June 1992.

Vardeman, Robert E., and Geo. W. Proctor. **Swords of Raemlyn, Book 1**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-56314-6, approx. 600pp, paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition [?]; contains three novels, all first published in the USA, 1985: *To Demons Bound*, *A Yoke of Magic* and *Blood Fountain*.) 23rd April 1992.

Westall, Robert. **The Stones of Muncaster Cathedral: Two Stories of the Supernatural**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-84093-9,

156pp, hardcover, £8.99. (Juvenile horror collection, first edition; Westall has gained a good deal of praise as one of Britain's best writers of fantastic tales for young adults.) Late entry: 1991 publication, received in March 1992.

Williamson, Philip G. **The Firstworld Chronicles, 1: Dinbig of Khimmur**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20680-9, 589pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 50.) 26th March 1992.

Wolfe, Gene. **Pandora by Holly Hollander**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-55345-0, 198pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy [?] novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) Late entry: November 1991 publication, received in March 1992.

Wurts, Janny. **The Master of Whitestorm**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223932-9, 448pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1992; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 23rd April 1992.

Zahn, Timothy. **Heir to the Empire: Star Wars, Volume 1**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40471-7, 399pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; the first in a new cycle of "original" Star Wars adventures, based on the characters created by George Lucas.) 23rd April 1992.

Overseas Books Received

Anthony, Piers. **Steppe**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51922-1, 252pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1976; in an afterword which dates from 1985 Anthony describes how he wrote this book in 1972, couldn't sell it to an American publisher, and eventually placed it with an obscure British hardcover house.) March 1992.

Asimov, Isaac, and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **Isaac Asimov Presents the Great SF Stories, #24 (1962)**. DAW, ISBN 0-88677-495-0, 348pp, paperback, \$5.50. (Sf anthology, first edition; this is the two-dozen volume in a retrospective best-of-the-year series which, for some reason, has never been published in the UK; the current volume contains well-known and not-so-well-known 1962 stories by Poul Anderson, J.G. Ballard, Harry Harrison, Cordwainer Smith, Theodore Sturgeon, James White and others.) Late entry: January 1992 publication, received in March.

Barron, Neil, ed. **Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide**. Garland, ISBN 0-8240-3148-2, 586pp, hardcover, \$49.95. (Reference book, first edition; a valuable critical/bibliographical resource for information on the fantasy field past and present, similar in arrangement to the same editor's *Anatomy of Wonder* [1987; on science fiction]; we've received it over a year late, but we're delighted with it; highly recommended.) Very late entry: 1990 publication, received in March 1992.

Barron, Neil, ed. **Horror Literature: A Reader's Guide**. Garland, ISBN 0-8240-4347-2, 596pp, hardcover, \$49.95. (Reference book, first edition; another valuable critical/bibliographical resource for information on the horror field past and present; it contains overlaps with the above volume, on fantasy, but we're similarly delighted with it; highly recommended.) Very late entry: 1990 publication, received in March 1992.

Beaumont, Charles. **The Howling Man**. Edited by Roger Anker. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50552-2, xxxii+572pp, paperback, \$4.99.

(Horror/fantasy collection, first published as Charles Beaumont: *Selected Stories* in 1988; this is a big, meaty "Best of Beaumont," with appreciations by Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, Roger Corman, Harlan Ellison, Richard Matheson, William F. Nolan, Chad Oliver and others; recommended.) March 1992.

Benford, Gregory, and William Rotsler. **Shiva Descending.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51690-7, 396pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1980; this reissue contains a new two-page "Afterword" by Benford; he describes the book as a "Big Rock Hits Earth" novel.) March 1992.

Brenner, Mayer Alan. **Spell of Fate: The Dance of Gods #3.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-508-6, 428pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition.) March 1992.

Clarke, Arthur C. **How the World Was One: Beyond the Global Village.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-07440-7, 295pp, hardcover, \$22.50. (Non-fiction pop-science text by a leading sf author; first edition; proof copy received; described as "a fascinating account of the history of telecommunications, from the visionary mind that postulated the orbital telecom satellite," it appears to be a rewrite and considerable expansion of his earlier book *Voice Across the Sea* [1958; revised 1974].) 15th June 1992.

Egan, Doris. **Two-Bit Heroes.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-500-0, 319pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; apparently the second of an adventure series which began with *The Gate of Ivory*.) Late entry: January 1992 publication, received in March.

Feist, Raymond E., and Janny Wurts. **Mistress of the Empire.** Doubleday/Foundation, ISBN 0-385-24719-2, 613pp, hardcover, \$20. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; third and concluding volume in the trilogy which began with *Daughter of the Empire* and *Servant of the Empire*.) 15th June 1992.

Forest, Elizabeth. **Phoenix Fire.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-515-9, 364pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) March 1992.

Garcia, Robert T., ed. **Chilled to the Bone: A Chill Anthology of Horror and Dark Fantasy.** Mayfair Games [PO Box 48539, Niles, Illinois 60648, USA], ISBN 0-923763-44-9, 246pp, trade paperback, \$9.95. (Horror anthology, first edition; contains all-new stories by Matthew J. Costello, Charles de Lint, Andre Norton, Judith & Garfield Reeves-Stevens, Steve & Melanie Tem and others.) Late entry: 1991 publication, received in March 1992.

Grant, Charles L. **Stunts.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-50698-7, 438pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 52.) March 1992.

Greenberg, Martin H. and Rosalind M., eds. **Horse Fantastic.** Introduction by Jennifer Roberson. DAW, ISBN 0-88677-504-3, xii+314pp, paperback, \$4.50. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; contains all-original stories on an equine theme by Mercedes Lackey, Barry N. Malzberg, Elizabeth Moon, Mike Resnick, Jennifer Roberson, Nancy Springer, Mary Stanton, Judith Tarr, Janny Wurts and others; perhaps significantly, the stories by the two male authors named above, Malzberg and Resnick, are about horse-racing rather than about horses for their own sweet sakes.) Late entry: December 1991 publication, received in March 1992.

Hogan, Ernest. **High Aztec.** "Ben Bova Presents." Tor, ISBN 0-812-50866-1, 248pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a second novel by the author of *Cortez on Jupiter*.) Late entry: February 1992 publication, received in March.

Huff, Tanya. **Blood Trail.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-502-7, 304pp, paperback, \$4.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; apparently the second of a series about Canadian vampires and werewolves which began with *Blood Price*.) Late entry: February 1992 publication, received in March.

Jeter, K.W. **Wolf Flow.** St Martin's Press, 0-312-07125-6, 247pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Horror novel, first edition; the title is a palindrome.) 14th April 1992.

Lindholm, Megan. **Alien Earth.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29749-X, 385pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) July 1992.

McCarty, John. **John McCarty's Official Splatter Movie Guide, Volume 2: Hundreds More of the Grossest, Goriest, Most Outrageous Movies Ever Made.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-07046-2, 199pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Horror movie guide, first edition.) Late entry: February 1992 publication, received in March.

Modesitt, L.E., Jr. **In Endless Twilight.** "Volume III of The Forever Hero." Tor, ISBN 0-812-52000-9, 316pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1988.) March 1992.

Niven, Larry, and Steven Barnes. **Achilles' Choice.** Illustrated by Boris Vallejo. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51083-6, 249pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991.) April 1992.

Norton, Andre, with P.M. Griffin. **Storms of Victory. Witch World: The Turning.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51109-3, 432pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in 1991; contains two short novels, "Port of Dead Ships" by Norton and "Seakeep" by Griffin.) March 1992.

Paxson, Diana L. **The Jewel of Fire: The Seventh Book of Westria.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51110-7, 309pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; it says "Copyright 1986" inside, but we think this is an error.) March 1992.

Pohl, Frederik. **Stopping at Slowyear.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29487-3, 151pp, paperback, \$3.50. (Sf novella; first published as a chapbook by Pulphouse Publishing in 1991; proof copy received.) June 1992.

Rawn, Melanie. **The Dragon Token: Dragon Star, Book II.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-493-4, 560pp, hardcover, \$20. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) Late entry: February 1992 publication, received in March.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **The Last of the Renshai: Book One of The Renshai Trilogy.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-503-5, 629pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is the first work by this author we have seen, although she has already written no less than five volumes of the "Bifrost Guardians" series, none of them published in Britain.) Late entry: January 1992 publication, received in March.

Robinson, Frank M. **The Dark Beyond the Stars.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51383-5, 408pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 52.) March 1992.

Saberhagen, Fred. **The Seventh Book of Lost Swords: Wayfinder's Story.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85000-X, 251pp, hardcover, \$17.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) June 1992.

Sarrantonio, Al. **Skeletons.** Bantam/Falcon, ISBN 0-553-29754-6, 406pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Horror [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received.) July 1992.

Shahar, Eluki bes. **Darktraders: Hellflower 2.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-507-8, 254pp,

paperback, \$4.50. (Sf novel, first edition.) March 1992.

Silke, James. **Frank Frazetta's Death Dealer, Book 2: Lords of Destruction.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-53821-8, 342pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1989.) March 1992.

Silverberg, Robert. **Thebes of the Hundred Gates.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29494-6, 116pp, paperback, \$3.50. (Sf novella; first published as a chapbook by Pulphouse Publishing in January 1992; proof copy received.) July 1992.

Williams, Walter Jon. **Voice of the Whirlwind.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51924-8, 278pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1987; reviewed by Ken Brown in *IZ* 33 and by Paul Brazier in *IZ* 46.) March 1992.

Willis, Connie. **Doomsday Book.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-08131-4, 438pp, hardcover, \$22. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the first new novel in five years from the author of the Campbell Award-winning *Lincoln's Dreams*.) 15th June 1992.

Wright, T.M. **Little Boy Lost.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-93172-7, 247pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) June 1992.

Zahn, Timothy. **Dark Force Rising: Star Wars, Volume 2.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-08574-3, 376pp, hardcover, \$18.50. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the second in a new cycle of "original" Star Wars adventures, based on the characters created by George Lucas, it has a first printing of 250,000 copies; gulp.) 15th May 1992.

This issue's *Small Ads* and "Coming Next Month" box appear on page 60.

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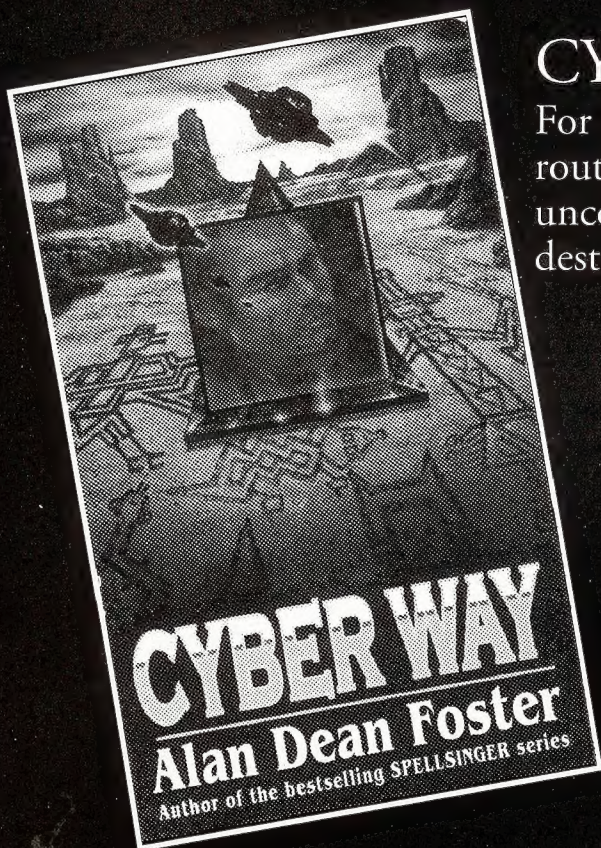


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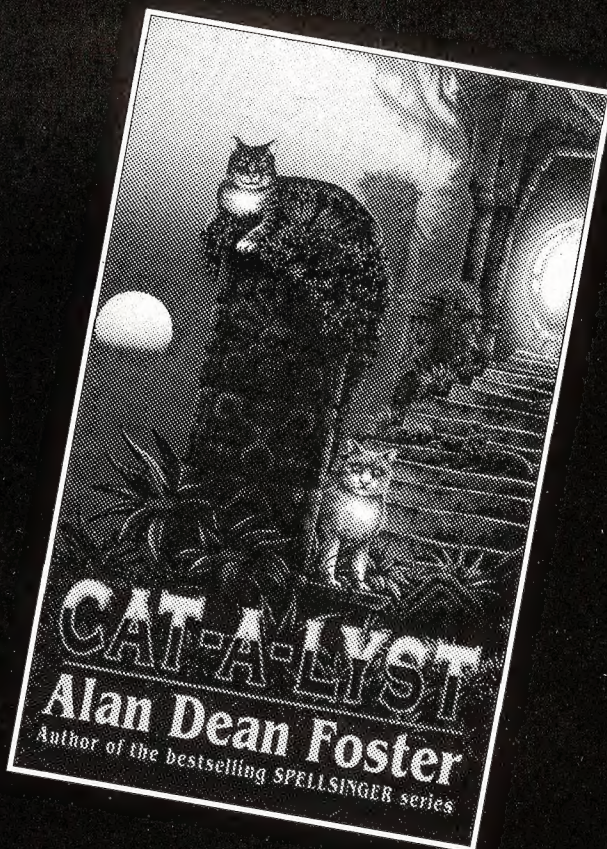
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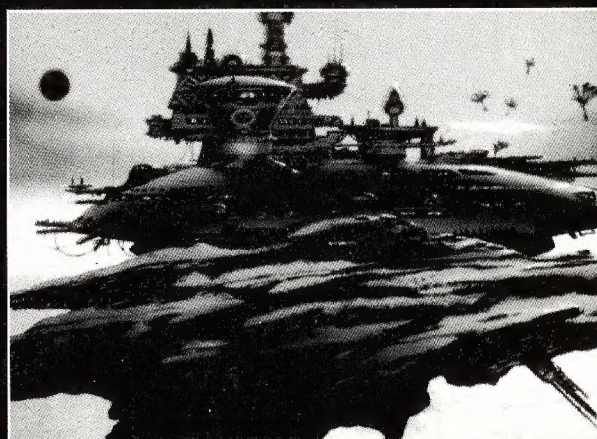
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